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Mr. Allen

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203355
28. 5. 26

Hodder and Stoughton
Limited London

PR
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A3M5

Made and Printed in Great Britain. Wyman & Sons Ltd., London, Reading and Fakenham

I

It is—if you come to think of it—a queer thing that I, James Pollen, a bachelor of independent means, asking little of the gods save their gracious permission to move quietly along my appointed path, should have been pitchforked, so to speak, into a whirlpool of alarming happenings. I dislike the transpontine word "happenings," but I can think of no better. What I am about to set down, as simply as possible, *happened* to me; and the imps of comedy must have been laughing together, for I, of all people in the world, am least fitted by temperament and character to play the part so disconcertingly thrust upon me.

I shall tell my story in my own way, the Georgian way. It is impossible for me to be Lloyd-Georgian. And for some years I have wandered up and down the Eighteenth Century, contemplating in my more robust moments a leisurely literary pilgrimage which my sister Agatha fondly believes may be a big book.

I had taken, furnished, for six months, a little moated grange in Essex, a county unknown to me, which I regarded as a sanctuary for myself and a sort of Holiday House for my two little nieces, aged ten and nine, respectively.

"This is the very thing you want," said my sister when Mote Farm was first brought under my notice.

"I suppose you mean it is the very thing *you* want," I replied neatly.

Unhappily, *finesse* is wasted upon Agatha, because, invariably, she travels straight to her objectives.

"That would be an additional advantage," she said, rather coldly. "As you have taken, most generously, a house in which we can spend the summer holidays every year for the past ten years, and as we have discussed at quite unnecessary length where we shall go this July, I needn't apologise for taking my wishes into consideration. But they have not been the chief thing in my mind, as you know."

One of Agatha's less admirable qualities is the ingenious way in which she makes you appear in the wrong when you are not in the wrong. She is aware that I dislike references to my so-called generosity. George Willing had married Agatha, who is two years my senior, when she was a girl of twenty. He was a superior fellow, but I never cared for him much. For many years after my nephew Geoffrey's birth the Willings were fairly prosperous. And then Agatha, to the surprise of everybody, added Matilda and Jemima to the family circle. Soon afterwards Willing showed signs of failing health and fortunes. They had to move into a smaller house. When Willing died it was a tight fit for poor Agatha, but fortunately I have more than enough for myself and have been able to help her along now and then. In fact, I should have been glad to do more than I have, but Agatha likes to stand on her own feet and I have to use some address in what I actually do, and take pleasure in doing. Although I confess that she annoys me now and again, she and her three children are the only close relations I have, and on balance they give me more than I give them. I made myself responsible for the education of the children ; and have been amply rewarded. Geoffrey, at the age of twenty-six, is distinguishing himself as a rising doctor, and is now comfortably on his own. As for Matilda and Jemima—ridiculous children with ridiculous names—what they will make of their education remains to be seen. I regard it as of little importance, although I am careful not to say so to Agatha, who has ideas upon the higher education of women. She knows I am cold to these ideas, but we have arrived at a tacit understanding as the result of a somewhat painful scene when Matilda and Jemima first embarked upon the contentious waters of their High School.

There is nothing cheaper in the way of education than a girls' High School, and I was almost ashamed of the contrast between what I was called upon to pay for my nieces and what I had paid for their brother. So when Agatha addressed them in my presence and told them that they owed it to Uncle Jim (in return for what he was doing for them) to pay unremitting attention to their studies, or some fly-blown phrase of that sort, I determined to put an end to it.

There they stood—thin, leggy, plain Matilda who laughed at my jokes as nobody else took the trouble to do, and my beautiful, fat Jemima (named after me) with her sausage curls—trusting souls, both of them, invited, nay commanded, to look upon me as a person whom they could please by paying unremitting attention to "studies" when really I was longing to hear how they had got on in their first hockey game, and whether there were any mistresses whom they disliked, but thought they could bamboozle.

I wasn't going to have it. I said:

"I don't care a hang about your studies. As long as you can read and write and add up figures and talk French more or less as they talk it in France—all of which you can do pretty well already—I shall be quite satisfied."

Never have I seen Agatha more annoyed. Matilda and Jemima were sent out of the room, ostensibly to get ready for tea, but actually to give my sister an opportunity for expressing herself in terms not suited to their infant ears. It may have been unwise of me to wink at them as they departed, and it would certainly have been dangerous for Matilda to wink back if Agatha had been in a position to see her doing so; but the conviction that the children and I understood each other enabled me to support what followed with equanimity.

I shall not repeat Agatha's arguments in support of the higher education of women; the gist of them can be gathered from the report of any Conference of Headmistresses. I did not take the trouble to refute them, but stuck to my point, and refused to be made an avuncular bugbear to Matilda and Jemima. "We've had great larks together," I said; "and we're going on having them. You look after their unremitting attention to studies and I'll look after their periods of recreation. They will want their minds readjusted, you know, and that will suit all our temperaments. What about a play on Saturday night as a regular thing? We will pick out suitable plays and enjoy ourselves."

Agatha lashed me with scorn. Did I never think about anything but enjoying myself? Was I deliberately encouraging *her* girls, both of whom had brains far above the ordinary, to despise work and focus their energies upon amusement? She added that she was painfully aware that I had asked Geoffrey to keep from her certain things that I had done for him at Cambridge, because I had known that she wouldn't approve. Fortunately he had enough strength of character not to be beguiled by me into idle ways; and she had made no comment at the time because she could trust her dear son, and, of course, she fully realised my generosity.

"Generosity be blowed, if you will excuse the expression," said I. "I undertook to make Geoffrey a certain allowance at Cambridge, and you shamelessly asked me to reduce it by the amount of his Scholarship. I let you think I was that sort of worm for the sake of domestic peace.

That's why I give in—or pretend to—to many of your absurdities. It's true I told him to have a good time on the extra bit of loot, and to say nothing to you about it. I had a good time at Cambridge, and why shouldn't he? Women—good earnest women, like you—never understand these things. You must allow Geoff and me, men together, to have our little secrets."

Agatha disliked being called a good earnest woman, but when she wakes the devil in me, she has to put up with plain speaking. Her face flushed, although she kept annoyance under control. "Men together!" she exclaimed with irony. "I suppose you mean boys together, though Geoffrey has far more sense of responsibility than you have ever had. With Matilda and Jemima it is a case of children together, and you are the most childish of the three."

"That's harsh, Agatha," I said. "That's very harsh."

However, she was off on her hobby-horse, prefacing her excursion with the exasperating reiteration that I was not selfish with my money, but having done lip-service to this redeeming point in my character she held me up as an awful example of those who might have made great names for themselves had they not been cursed with a modest competence.

II

But I must get back to our moated grange.

The fact is that I had postponed the actual writing of my great work for fifteen years. It must not be understood that I was positively idle during this period. Far from it. I had been reading up my subject and collecting my material. The books were there on my shelves to show it, and if I could lay my hands on all the notes I have written from time to time—and could decipher all of them—I should think they would make a valuable book in themselves, or at least a magazine article. But Agatha's unworthy suspicions had been growing, and looking back I can see that the ultimatum was launched on that day in September when Matilda and Jemima first went to school. By the time Christmas came round it was pretty well decided that I should begin to write my book forthwith, and before the Easter holidays were upon us it was almost settled that I should spend the summer away from London in order to work at it undisturbed.

So it was that when we all went to Allington-on-Sea for a fortnight at Easter, a scheme had already developed in Agatha's mind of finding a furnished house there in which I could install myself, and where she and the children could join me for the summer holidays. I may say that at the time we went to Allington I had not the slightest intention of giving in to this proposal, but such is Agatha's persistence, when she has an idea in her head, that I generally find it more convenient to oppose her in the earlier stages. I admit that this sometimes involves more trouble in the end, but—well, that is the course I am inclined to take.

In this instance I allowed myself to feign an interest in the furnished houses which she obtained orders to view, but turned them all down for one reason or another. When the reasons became difficult to find I said boldly that nothing would induce me to spend the summer in a seaside town. What I wanted was to be out of the world altogether; not far from the sea, perhaps, because the children would require that element for their bathing and so forth, and I liked it occasionally myself. But what I really wanted was flowers and fields and birds, and commodities of that sort. "I want to commune with Nature, if you understand me," I said. "I am aware that the proper study of mankind is man, but——"

"What you really want, I suppose, is to get out of it altogether," Agatha interrupted me, in a way that would have been rude from anybody but a fondly-loved sister. "But if you do want the country—though I think it is most irritating of you not to say so before—we will begin all over again. I am sure there is something to be found in this neighbourhood, and we can take the car and scour it until we do find what you want. But before we go any farther would this part of the world suit you if we can find something that you like?"

"I have no objection to this part of the world," I said. "You can't expect mountains and moors within an hour and a half's journey out of London, and I can't cut myself off from London altogether because I can't bring all my books with me, and

I shall have to run up sometimes to consult authorities."

Agatha's lip stiffened, but she pursued her course. "It is understood that if we find something suitable you will bring Deacon and Mrs. Deacon down to look after you, and let the flat?"

It was a burning of boats, but I said that it was so understood.

"And you are really serious in saying that you *want* to find something?"

"The answer is in the affirmative."

"A house, not too big, but well furnished, with a nice garden, and right in the country—out of the world, as you have said yourself. Is there anything else?"

"Well, a garage for the car."

"Yes, of course, a garage or some outbuildings in which you could put the car. Now is that all?"

The ground was slipping from under me. "I think I should stipulate for a moat," I said.

But it doesn't do to try Agatha too far. She left the room without a word and went to the house agents.

It is extraordinary how the fates work on behalf of those who will stand no nonsense from them. It will scarcely be believed that within a quarter of an hour Agatha had returned to the hotel, where I was using the lounge for the purpose for which I suppose it had been named, with particulars of Mote Farm in the parish of Yeldham, seven miles from Allington. All the rest she might have been expected to find, she being Agatha, who would find a needle in a haystack if she wanted one and had nowhere else to look. But the moat! I did think I had stumped her there. Of course it was unfair, because I should not actually have insisted upon the moat, nor would she have allowed me to do so; but as I had made the stipulation, with humorous intention, and the moat had been provided, she took it as finally clinching the matter.

I can't altogether blame her. If she considered that Providence was playing into her hands, almost as if it could be worked on in the same way as she was accustomed to work upon me, I was not without a superstitious feeling myself that I was being directed, in a path that I was not over-anxious to follow. I had to leave the lounge, and go round to the house agents, to satisfy myself that Mote Farm *was* the very thing I wanted, as Agatha said it was. I had some faint hope that the drains would be defective, or the water unfit for human consumption, or the rent too high, or the pigsties too near the house. I had not time to think of any other objections during the short walk, and I was unable to cavil at the answers to any of those.

There weren't any drains, which puzzled me until Agatha explained—I don't know where she gets all her information—that small, old-fashioned houses in the country are better without them. The house agent backed her up, using the word " sanitation " instead of " drains," which seemed to convict me of indelicacy, and caused me to waive the subject. The water was from a well that had never been known to run dry within the memory of the oldest inhabitant of the village, and I was shown a guarantee of purity, signed by the Lord High Prohibitionist of the County, which would have done credit to the Fountain of Bandusia. And Agatha reminded me that I never drank water anyhow. The agent was quite sure that the pigsties, if any, were nowhere near the house. We found afterwards that he was wrong, but as there had been no pigs in them within the memory of the oldest inhabitant I could not reasonably take advantage of his error. As for the rent, it was so low that I thought at first the agent must inadvertently have dropped a nought out of it, or taken down "per week" instead of "per month." But he explained that the Squire was a recluse, absorbed in research work, and a man of large means. An aged spinster had lived at Mote Farm for many years. She was dead. The Squire had not raised the rent.

Agatha pricked attentive ears at mention of the local magnate. His name—Allen—conveyed nothing to her, or to me. But this Mr. Allen—according to the agent—was a great traveller, and in particular an explorer of the upper waters of the Amazon. He added carelessly:

"He never entertains."

How little all this meant to me at the time, and how much it meant afterwards!

III

The agent assured us, with an absence of emphasis which looked like sincerity, that Mote Farm was the greatest bargain he had had on his books within the memory of the O.I., and if we did not take it immediately, somebody else would. In fact, we had better go and inspect that afternoon, for he had just sent an advertisement to the papers, and expected to be inundated on the morrow.

This, I confess, whetted my appetite, for I do not profess to be free from the usual weaknesses of human nature, though Agatha, I believe, does. Besides we were due for a drive in the car, and might as well go to Yeldham as anywhere. So Matilda and Jemima were summoned from the beach—Geoffrey had already gone back to London—and within half an hour I was skilfully driving towards my fate, with Agatha seated by my side and the children packed into the dicky behind.

It was a warm spring day ; the hedges were green and the primroses were out. We passed manor houses, old solid-towered churches, mellow farm-houses and picturesque cottages, and if there was no great variety in the rather flat country, it was pleasantly laid out in pasture and arable land, with stretches of woodland here and there, and was altogether soothing and English. Agatha refrained on this occasion from giving me too many instructions about my manipulation of levers, of which she knows nothing, and I enjoyed the drive.

We found the village of Yeldham, which had a little stream running by the side of the road, and bridges crossing it to the cottage gardens, and were directed by three of the local idiots, whom we were unfortunate enough to hit upon for our inquiries, to Mote Farm. By collating the information extracted from them, we presently found it, turning off from the main road and passing the park of Yeldham Old Hall. Then up a gentle rise through a thick wood, and there was Mote Farm facing a sloping meadow in front of us, certainly as much out of the world as anyone could wish, though less so by a mile or two than the village inefficients had led us to suppose.

A low, whitewashed brick house with dormer windows and a red roof, a little drive with big trees on either side of it. The moat was a long stretch of water in front of the house, with a grass walk on one side of it and a bowling green on the other, beyond this a double herbaceous border. The moat was crossed by a wooden bridge, and nobody could have taken it for anything but a moat, though I have seen them more mediæval.

Agatha took the house for me. She is like that, prompt and efficient. She engaged the caretaker, a Mrs. Peabody, as " extra help," and combined her husband as gardener. With my two beloved Deacons, my cook and manservant, our modest establishment was now complete. There are occasions when I am glad of Agatha's direct and competent methods. The literary temperament, to which I can lay some claim, as the production of a substantial book is engrossing so much of my attention, is not fitted to cope adequately with the lesser complications of life. From Mrs. Peabody without any detestable "pumping" we gleaned interesting information about our Squire's daughter, Ursula, who had been brought up at Yeldham Vicarage during the long years when Mr. Allen was exploring in Africa and South America.

Obviously the Squire was not popular in the parish, as obviously Miss Ursula was regarded as perfectly sweet. I had a glimpse of a bread-and-butter miss, much too saccharine for my palate. It will soon be seen that I did her a great injustice, but it is important that my impressions should be recorded honestly. The Squire, so Mrs. Peabody informed us, had bought the Yeldham Old Hall property some fifteen years before. Evidently he was looked upon by the natives as a carpet-bagger. When at home he kept himself to himself, he was no sportsman, he had nothing to do with other county magnates, and he enjoyed (Mrs. Peabody's word) ill-health. Apparently, too, he doctored himself. On the other hand, he was not ungenerous either to his tenants or his daughter. Agatha, as soon as we were alone together, said with finality:

"James, there is a mystery here."

I pooh-poohed this as absurd, although I have some respect for feminine intuition. It is only fair to Agatha to add that she does not make mountains out of molehills, even in a country as flat as Essex. She went on undauntedly:

"Does the name Allen suggest anything to you?"

"Yes; it suggests Hanbury. It is impossible to think of Allen without Hanbury." I continued briskly: "Now, Agatha, here we are, and here we remain for six months. Let them be peaceful months. Don't harry me with questions!"

This silenced her for the moment, but as I was refilling my pipe, she murmured:

"Perhaps this house is haunted. That is why you are getting it so cheap."

The blessed children rushed in most opportunely. They had scampered round the garden; they were delighted with everything.

"We are going to have the time of our lives," exclaimed Matilda.

"We are—we are," piped up Jemima.

Out of the mouths of babes——!

IV

There are occasions, as I have said before, when my sister's energies and activities (I wish to be fair and will own up candidly) save me a lot of trouble. In a large operation, such as taking a furnished house or signing a biggish cheque, I can act in a large way and make nothing of it. But having done that the tiresome petty details in connection with any move weigh heavily upon me. Agatha took this weight off my shoulders, and in common fairness I must say that I was given no trouble at all.

Agatha then set about the letting of my flat. I should have preferred to keep it on, but she wouldn't hear of that. And, as she had been so good in shielding me from the petty annoyances so irksome to a man of letters, whose brain can only function successfully in an atmosphere of calm, I couldn't very well withstand her. She interviewed various house agents, cross-examined prospective tenants, picked her victim, charged him what she thought fit, and ultimately brought me in triumph a cheque which made me wonder that such things could be. Nor would she consent to share the loot with me, or accept a small present for all the trouble she had taken, which included a combing out of servants, and some complicated arrangement about the telephone and electric light and the gas and a stock of fuel in hand, which seemed to me a sort of heads-I-win-tails-you-lose business, but which she guaranteed to be entirely equitable. If I could have handed over fifty pounds of the swag I should have felt more comfortable about it. It would have been partly in the nature of conscience money. But Agatha is like that; she gives as much as she can (including advice) and takes as little as she can (also including advice). I know I could reward her by toiling as if the workhouse were round the corner, but that is just what I can't bring myself to do. I should be a better man if I could, as she often remarks.

For reasons which I need not go into I did not take up my residence at Mote Farm until we all went there for the summer holidays, I had a little trip abroad, and when I came back I stayed at the club for a fortnight. Agatha had a good deal to say about this, but I will not worry my readers with what she said, or with what I replied, some of which, however, was rather neat. At the end of July, when Matilda and Jemima were released from their scholastic labours, we went down to Mote Farm together, determined to enjoy our holiday to the full, but little imagining what lay before us.

On the first Sunday we all went to church. The congregation was sparse. The school-children, under the care of a thin female of the sort that would look unnatural without pince-nez, formed about half of it. In a comfortable loose-box to the right of the chancel sat a young girl, presumably the Squire's daughter. Being short-sighted I could not see her plainly. Among the natives I spotted two of the mental cases from whom we had inquired our way to Mote Farm, but the rest of them looked saner. Two elderly ladies of Anglo-Catholic behaviour genuflected in a front pew. These, with the Vicar and his wife, represented the quality. Mrs. Peabody had told us that the Vicar's name was Berridge. He looked ill. Mrs. Peabody had told my good Mrs. Deacon, who told Agatha, that he had broken down in health some twenty years before, working in an East End parish. He was not very popular, too "high church." His wife appeared to be a worthy woman, maternally plump. She it was who had mothered Miss Ursula. Agatha conjectured that she might domineer over her husband. She was not too sure that she liked Mrs.

Berridge. " I shouldn't have thought you would dislike any woman who is domineering," I said, but she pretended not to hear me.

Coming out of church, we saw Ursula Allen in July sunshine. She smiled at Jemima, who at once fell captive to her charms. Charm she had. It radiated from her. Agatha admitted that she was a pretty girl and a nice one. This was much from my sister. Where girls are concerned she had a watchful eye. For more years than I care to reckon she looked upon all girls as potential wives for me, and her opinion of me as a potential husband was thus shown to be higher than she ever admitted, for few of them passed her tests. Latterly, her watchfulness on my behalf had relaxed, for she was even more on guard to defend Geoffrey against the beguilements of minxes, and it was only natural that she should demand a higher standard for him than she thought suitable for me.

When Ursula smiled at my beautiful Jemima, her glance lingered for an instant on us. Almost she invited a greeting. Agatha expressed herself as of the opinion that we should have an opportunity of making friends with her. She was right in this, as she generally is in such matters.

Agatha went up to London, next day, and in the afternoon the Vicar and his wife paid their first call.

Matilda, Jemima and I were playing a game. Matilda, dressed in some of Agatha's clothes (which I had given her leave to borrow on condition that she said nothing about it), was playing mistress of the house, and Jemima, in parlour-maid's kit (lent by Mrs. Deacon, who has sympathy for childish sports), was the "slavey" who opened the door at which I had just knocked as a visitor. Not to make a mystery of it, I was impersonating Mr. Allen. The idea was for the mistress of the house to rebuke me severely for not bringing Miss Allen with me, but the game ended abruptly because just as I was thundering at the door for the third time, and anathematising the servants in a voice intended to carry through the door to Jemima's ears, the genuine visitors appeared.

In order to carry out realistically the rôle of a country squire paying a visit, I had put on a tall hat and a dark London overcoat over my knickerbockers, and to be caught in this fancy costume bellowing at my own front door must have given the Vicar cause to think that the list of his mentally deficient parishioners had been enlarged. As I was embarking upon an exclamation Jemima flung open the door and shouted: "Go away at once, or I'll fetch the police," and then, observing that I was not alone, incontinently fled.

Anyway the ice was broken. A faint smile curved the Vicar's ascetic lips. I led the way into the panelled parlour.

I wished that Agatha had been at home, for in these social encounters she holds her own admirably. In a jiffy, I decided that Mrs. Berridge intended to find out as much as possible about us, and I suspected that our social status interested her more than our attitude towards ecclesiastical ritual.

I did not tell her that an uncle of ours had been Lord Mayor of London, and knighted for it, because I thought such proof of our quality would be more effective if it were allowed to leak out by and by. On church questions I remained non-committal, and if Mrs. Berridge went away with the idea that we shouldn't be of much use to her, well, that was what I wanted.

To be frank, I also wanted information about our neighbours, and this they were quite prepared to give. It surprised me how little they knew about the Squire. I said that I hoped he would call.

"He is sure to call," said the Vicar.

"Once," added Mrs. Berridge, rather tartly.

However, when she began to talk about Ursula, my heart warmed to her. Ursula, it seemed, was a dear and a sweet, and little more than eighteen.

"Quite unspoilt," said Mrs. Berridge.

"As yet," added the Vicar.

"The Squire was not in church," said I.

"No—no. Most people in this parish come to Matins on Sunday, and there it ends. May I ask what church you attend in London, Mr. Pollen ?"

"I don't usually attend any," I replied with an engaging air of candour. Mrs. Berridge was softened by it ; the Vicar winced. I made sure he was thinking : "He attends the Church of Laodicea." We harked back to Ursula. The good Mrs. Berridge purred :

"We have done what we could for the child ;

no expense has been spared upon her education—the best of schools. A maid of Arcady, Mr. Pollen." She sighed. "And a great responsibility. She is now mistress of Old Hall. Mr. Allen—this is between ourselves—is a sad invalid. On the upper waters of the Amazon he contracted some form of tropical malaria. . . . He is treating himself. He works indefatigably, in his laboratory."

"What you tell me, Mrs. Berridge, makes me sorry for little Miss Ursula."

"The happiest creature, I assure you. Still, one prays that a young woman who will inherit a nice property may remain unspotted by the world."

"What sort of person is this mysterious Mr. Allen," I asked. "You say he's an invalid. Is he so bad that he doesn't eat or drink or smoke like an ordinary man?"

Mrs. Berridge laughed.

"I don't know what he eats or drinks," she said, "because one so seldom has the opportunity of seeing him at a meal. But he certainly smokes. Do you remember that odd little occurrence with the tobacco pouch, Edgar?"

The Vicar frowned.

"One ought not to tell anything that might give a wrong impression of Mr. Allen," he said hurriedly.

But Mrs. Berridge was evidently accustomed to go her own way.

"Oh, I don't make anything of it," she said. "Men like that who have been accustomed to hobnob with savages and cannibals aren't like other people. Well, I must tell you, Mr. Pollen, that on one occasion Mr. Allen had just come back from New Guinea, and had some most interesting experiences to give us. He had been quite in the wilds without seeing a white man for months together. It was wonderful for us stay-at-homes to hear so much, and I was quite fascinated by his talk. Presently, he asked me if I objected to his smoking a pipe, and he pulled out of his pocket a large tobacco pouch which wasn't like anything I had ever seen. I just asked him, more for the sake of saying something than anything, what it was made of. Imagine my horror when he replied quietly: 'It is made out of human skin, three thicknesses of it.' He handed it to me to look at, but nothing would have induced me to touch the horrid thing. And he said it had been given him by a Papuan chief with whom he had made friends. I think he said it had been taken from another chief, whom his friend—pretty sort of friends he must have made!—had killed. I shall never forget how it came over me, when he rolled it up and put it back in his pocket and said to me: 'I've no doubt, Mrs. Berridge, he ate him after he'd killed him'."

She laughed pleasantly, being rather devoid of imagination, perhaps. New Guinea was a long way off, and if people killed and ate each other there, she could put up with it. But I didn't see it as a laughing matter, and I don't think the Vicar did either, though he said nothing more after she had shown herself determined to tell her story. It seemed to throw a sinister light upon this man, who could bring out such an object of horror in the drawing-room of a quiet English vicarage and treat it as a matter of course that he should make constant use of it.

Yes—mystery lurked somewhere about me, disconcertingly ambushed. I have no nose for mysteries; and when I had accompanied my visitors across what Jemima called the "drawbridge," and found myself alone upon the peaceful bowling green, I was quite unable to analyse my odd conviction that some sort of trouble, an amorphous shadow of evil, confronted me. Later on, after a glass or two of port, I told myself that a man of the world ought to laugh at ill-founded misgivings. What was Allen to me, anyhow? What was Miss Allen? A pillow fight with Jemima and Matilda (strictly forbidden if Agatha's pillows were used as weapons) cleared my befogged wits. I slept like a dormouse.

V

Agatha returned next day, and I met her at Yeldham station, which is not in Yeldham but some three miles distant. She brought with her cheering news. Geoffrey was coming to us for the next week-end. Later on, he would give us a month of his agreeable society. Agatha asked, with almost indecent haste, if the Squire had called. I read her thoughts easily. Then I told her that the Vicar and his wife liked our special blend of tea.

"If I had known they were coming——"

I answered all her questions—with reservations, not entirely to her satisfaction, because she said querulously :

" I hope these Berridges don't think you are as simple as you look."

" Simplicity is my greatest asset. Did you mention Miss Allen to Geoffrey ? "

My sister blushed, not unbecomingly. If she had a sense of humour—— !

" I may have done so."

" Dear Agatha ! "

" In point of fact I did ; he was not particularly interested."

" Ah ! You sang her praises too indiscreetly."

" Nothing of the sort. To prove to you how little you understand me and your own nephew it may surprise you to hear that Geoffrey is far more interested in Mr. Allen."

" You do surprise me. Why ? "

" Because he is engaged in research work. As a bacteriologist Mr. Allen is known to Geoffrey, favourably known. Mr. Allen has written a monograph upon the more obscure forms of tropical disease. He is looking forward to making Mr. Allen's acquaintance. As for Ursula——"

" You call her by her Christian name already ? "

" Jim "—when she calls me " Jim " I pull up my socks—" Jim, you know that you think of her as Ursula. We Pollens are not humbugs and hypocrites. Why, I ask, were we *directed here* ? When that nice girl tripped out of church, I knew—and so did you."

She laughed.

"Agatha," I replied solemnly; "there are moments when you are too much for me."

Mr. Allen *Chapter II*

I

According to my notions, Master Geoff takes a too serious view of life. But if he prefers to talk about bacteria with Mr. Allen, and leaves me free to enjoy Ursula's society, conjoined with that of Matilda and Jemima, I say: "No complaints." Approaching my tenth *lustrum*, I am hardened against the goddess of love, but I feel myself rejuvenated and refreshed by youthful companionship. After all it is an arduous task to make oneself master of the social life of a century, as I am doing, and it will be a great adventure (for me) writing a book about it. In my hours of ease, I have contemplated a textbook on golf. It is true that my handicap at Rye is eighteen, but talking things over with friends at the Dormy House, we are agreed that the many manuals upon golf, written by experts, all of them borrowed and carefully read by me, are counsels of perfection, and some of them, mark you, designedly put upon the market in the interests of the professional.

However, I have no intention of anticipating my textbook upon the ancient game by dwelling upon my theories here. Suffice it to say that I intended to practise certain shots alone at the Mote Farm, in a meadow of crisp turf, which lies just beyond the bowling green.

Upon the morning after Agatha's return from town, I took my new baffy and went into the meadow with half a dozen balls. I lost most of them. I'm not a pincher, but losing golf balls annoys me. The new baffy surpassed expectations. Without pressing, I drove one ball out of sight. To have lost that would not have irritated me. I did lose it.

Ursula Allen found it.

The meadow adjoins the park of Yeldham Old Hall. It seems that from the park palings Miss Allen had watched me drive this particular ball. She said afterwards that watching the flight and distance of the ball she had assumed that I was a "scratch" player. As a matter of fact, it carried the park palings and fell in some bracken not far from Mademoiselle. She found it, and brought it to me, complimenting me upon a no mean performance. I said promptly:

"You are a golfer."

"A novice, Mr. Pollen."

She smiled at me as she had smiled at Jemima. Such a smile to a young man in business would be worth about five hundred a year.

"Of course, you are Miss Allen."

These informal introductions captivate me. I marked the simplicity of her frock, but Agatha had warned me that simplicity in frocks is no indication of simplicity of character. Ursula—let us drop formalities—said ingenuously:

"Father and I are going to call upon you to-morrow afternoon."

I replied with enthusiasm: "Splendid!"

She looked slightly astonished, but, nothing daunted, I followed up my opening gambit.

"I believe," said I, "in friendship at sight. Coming out of church, when you smiled upon Jemima, you became instantly a pal."

"The darling's name is Jemima, is it?"

A roguish eye looked into mine. Here was a young woman who liked children. My heart warmed to her. I expatiated at some length upon my nieces, which provoked the remark: "You have no children of your own."

"My sister's children are mine, Miss Allen."

"I'm sure they are."

Within five minutes, I was explaining to her my theories on golf. Never have I had an apter pupil.

II

Ursula and I parted, that morning, firm friends. When I looked at my watch I discovered that we had spent an hour together, sixty winged minutes. After she left me, I tried ineffectively to make a thumbnail sketch (in prose) of her, which I could exhibit, at luncheon, to Agatha. Her features are charmingly irregular. A firm little chin keeps in order a pair of mutinous lips. Her nose has a tilt to it. If she follows her nose she will reach heaven. There is a suggestion of the gipsy about her dark hair and eyes. To call her "pretty," as Agatha did, is insulting and cheap. Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that she must have had a delightful mother. Mrs. Berridge soared in my estimation. I must mention that the child spoke of the Berridges with affection.

"Didn't you think," she asked me demurely, "that Mrs. Berridge was rather a nice person to sit next to at tea?"

This hit off the vicar's wife exactly. She had enjoyed her tea, particularly Mrs. Deacon's hot scones. She had said pleasant things about the Mote Farm garden. I guessed that Ursula had been encouraged by Mrs. Berridge to look for and find happiness in what was apparently a dull, prosaic environment. Joy in life sparked in her eyes and dimpled her red-brown cheeks. But—did she find joy at Old Hall? I had misgivings, because, as we said good-bye, I happened to remark that I looked forward to making the acquaintance of her father. I thought that I detected shadows in her eyes, as she answered simply:

"Father is not a tea-table acquaintance. He has lived so much of his life alone, in—in wild places. Father is a man of silences. I—I often wonder what he is thinking about, but he never tells me."

Mind you, this was not said sadly, not a tincture of self-pity. The girl stated a fact. I accepted it as such, suspending judgment of my landlord. And yet, I was sure that Ursula had no love for her father. When she mentioned him, all warmth was out of her soft voice. Somehow, I felt vaguely uneasy.

My thoughts wandered afield, accompanied by two golf balls. In both cases I had lost my usual sense of direction. Nevertheless, before I returned to the house, I had found a working hypothesis, satisfactory so far as it went. An explorer and a man of science cannot be judged (much less condemned) by ordinary standards of conduct. Personally, I could not conceive of any father leaving such a delightful daughter as Ursula to be brought up by strangers. The Berridges were strangers when Mr. Allen entrusted Ursula to them. Happily, such a risky experiment seemed to have justified itself. Again, Allen probably adored his wife. Her unexpected death, leaving him alone with a mere baby, may have crumpled him up. He had rushed at the Back of Beyond, seeking solitude like some wounded animal. And then the wilderness had claimed him. He had fallen a victim to tramp fever.

Absorbed by these reflections I was late for luncheon and rebuked severely by Jemima and Matilda, who had reached the pudding stage. I appeased them and Agatha by exhibiting my thumbnail sketch of Ursula, and adding that they would all have an opportunity within twenty-four hours of meeting her in the flesh. The children exclaimed, with their mouths full of roly-poly :

" May we have tea in the drawing-room, Mummy ? "

" That," replied Agatha, with Victorian majesty, " depends upon how you behave yourselves between now and then."

We left it at that.

Alone with Agatha and the excellent coffee made by Mrs. Deacon, I endeavoured, not too successfully, to purge her mind of conclusions founded upon insufficient data.

" We shall find Mr. Allen," I predicted calmly, " one of those quiet, unobtrusive persons, slightly self-centred and self-sufficient, who pursue knowledge for its own sake."

My sister sniffed. She doesn't know that she sniffs, and perhaps I ought to warn her that she is acquiring a reprehensible habit.

" You have ' humble ' Allen in mind, the do-good-by-stealth sort of man ? "

" Quite likely."

" Well, we shall see. I never pay any attention to servants' gossip " (Oh, Agatha !), " but, I for my part, am quite sure that I shall *not* like Mr. Allen. As we shall see little or nothing of him the matter is of no importance. I have looked him up."

For the moment I thought that my sister had braved the lion in his laboratory. She continued blandly :

" In ' Who's Who,' and Burke's ' Landed Century.' He is not to be found in either of those bulky volumes, which certainly include men who have no business to be there."

" Exactly. A pushing, self-advertising fellow would see to it that he was given such publicity, little as it may be worth. Instead, he is known by name to ardent young workers, like Geoff."

Agatha sniffed for the second time.

III

Allen and Ursula arrived at four, next day. The children and I were playing "Out pounce, Piggy" in the garden, a pastime that involved me in no embarrassments when our visitors were announced. We had tea under the fine elms that shade part of the bowling green.

Allen refused tea.

I will attempt a thumbnail sketch of him, rough pencillings made that same afternoon.

He looked cadaverous. A parchment, crinkled skin threw into relief a pair of amazing eyes, brown irises with an opalescent rim to them. Jemima declared him to be a king beaver, but that is absurd, inasmuch as his beard was a greyish-black, not red. He had a predatory nose. As a young man he must have been robust, but he had shrunk, a gaunt figure in clothes too big for him. His thin, prehensile fingers, particularly noticeable as they curved themselves round the stem of his pipe, advertised themselves as the fingers of a microscopist accustomed to deal delicately with fragile objects. His voice was soft and husky.

In the jargon of to-day, he established himself in my mind as a personality.

Even Agatha had to admit that he behaved himself as a gentleman.

After tea, which he refused not unchurlishly, he begged permission to light his pipe; (he seemed to have an ordinary pouch), and I lit mine at the same moment, as the children drifted away accompanied by Ursula.

He smoked in meditative silence. So did I. I find, on looking over my notes—taken down, mark you, before the terrible truth revealed itself—this sentence: "I see no trace whatever of any likeness between Allen and his daughter."

Allen broke the silence.

"I have some curious trophies at Old Hall. It might interest you to see them. You have heard of the Head Hunters of the Amazon?" Not waiting for my reply, he went on coolly: "The heads are rare and valuable, not much larger than oranges——"

"Real heads?" asked Agatha incredulously.

He nodded.

"Yes; the skull is removed, but the likeness is preserved, and part of the hair. They are repulsively ugly, these miniature heads, but in their way works of art, a secret art. The specimens in the Royal College of Surgeons are not nearly so remarkable as mine. I will show mine to you, if you care to see them."

Poor Agatha shuddered. Her congested eyes strayed in the direction of Ursula. We could hear in the distance, her delightful laugh.

"I should like to see them," I said discreetly, because it occurred to me that if we wished to enjoy Ursula's society it would be impolitic to affront her father.

Her father—— !

Why, in the name of the Sphinx, had she chosen such a father?

I must admit that after this the talk ambled. Allen was quite willing to talk about his adventures and misadventures, and he talked modestly and well. But was it significant that he never mentioned his daughter? His glance never once strayed in her direction. When he rose to take leave, he said amiably:

"I will leave my girl here with your kind permission. She is a mere child, exuberantly happy with other children. She can return home at her own convenience—and yours."

Agatha murmured something civil. Allen lifted his hat, and hurried away, no doubt to his laboratory.

You can guess what my sister said—and left unsaid—as soon as the Squire was out of ear-shot. On such occasions, I never interrupt her. She was in full spate. When breath failed her, I uttered a note of warning:

"It takes many men, my dear, to make a world."

Trite, but what would you? Agatha retorted with quite unnecessary heat:

"If a man of your gifts of expression can find nothing better to say than that I wonder you don't hold your tongue. Oh! That unfortunate child! What a monster!"

I had to rebuke her. With forbearance I pointed out, with pardonable exaggeration, Allen's good qualities.

"He is courteous, anxious in his way, to show us some attention. He cannot be unkind to Ursula, or she would reveal it in her face and manner. She has remained just a child to him, remote from his activities and tastes. Obviously, it is up to us to be nice to this motherless girl. It will be a privilege. To exercise that privilege we must go easy with the father."

I may have harped too long upon this string, and at the time I expressed myself more colloquially. Agatha, I regret to say, tossed my suggestions to the four winds of heaven.

"I tell you this man despises and hates women. No wonder his wife died. You can return his call. *You* can gloat with him over his disgusting heads. Mr. Allen, James, is beyond my horizon."

"He obscures mine, my dear."

We might have bickered on, but Ursula joined us, followed, of course, by the children, now devoted slaves. Jemima blurted out:

"Mummy, Ursula doesn't want to go. Make her stay, please."

Ursula stayed. I detected in Agatha a ripening of maternal instincts. She is essentially protective. She beamed upon a monster's child. And Ursula, of course, accepted her blandishments innocently, quite unaware of what inspired them. At Matilda's suggestion we betook ourselves to the raspberry patch.

IV

I went to bed early with a sense of virtue, and hung out of my bedroom window for a long time, enjoying the silence and peace of the night, which increased my sense of virtue, for only a man with a clear conscience can wallow in that sort of thing unless he happens to be in love. I am not in love, and never shall be again—NEVER ! (Touch wood !) It was the same in the morning, when I arose immediately after old Deacon had brought me my tea and finished fiddling about with my clothes. I may almost be said to have bounded out of bed, for I had slept so well and felt so fit. Again I rushed to the window and sucked in the sweet fresh air and took pleasure in watching the blackbirds and thrushes on the bowling green. You don't get that sort of pleasure in London, however fit you may feel, and you haven't the sense of a glorious day before you to do exactly what you please and where you please.

I saw the meadow, sun-kissed. I had said, *en passant*, as I bade Ursula good night, that I intended to practise mashie shots between the hours of ten and one. It would not surprise or distress me if the child turned up with her mashie. In the morning, Jemima and Matilda are on the chain, although these are euphemistically called holidays. The hapless pair are instructed in what Agatha terms domestic duties, and there is a little quiet reading aloud from books dear to my sister, but regarded as hopelessly out of date by

Matilda. A mere man protests in vain against such petty tyrannies. I contend that "The Fairchild Family" were a set of impossible bores, all of 'em. I am forbidden to attend these readings, because I could not refrain from comments which tickled the fancy of the children and seemed to make Agatha hot in the collar.

(*N.B.* I must beware of divagations.)

While I was shaving, I reflected that a girl of Ursula's age ought to be having lots of fun. It was really pathetic to mark her gratitude to us for making much of her. She kissed Agatha, and my sister is not a woman one kisses except perfunctorily. I wondered, too, what Ursula would think of Geoff.

Knowing the habits of my nieces, I hastened to the kitchen garden. The innocents would have turned up at family prayers with stained lips if I had not insisted upon wiping them myself. We made a presentable and punctual appearance at nine o'clock in the dining-room.

After breakfast, I fixed up an arrangement in the meadow for practising mashie shots, an idea of my own. I put up a stick for which Deacon had made me a little red flag. Then I marked out the ground with garden labels at distances of ten yards apart up to one hundred yards, and my practice ground was ready. I had to explain to Agatha that work on my *magnum opus* would not suffer. My happiest ideas have always come to me in the fresh air. Besides, I had become keener than ever on my little golf-book for duffers, written by a duffer. Ursula had told me that she would buy it and recommend it to her friends. Poor dear child! How many friends had she?

I took six "repaints," and played up to the flag from each of the labels, beginning at twenty yards, a wrist shot. I was very pleased with myself. Given the right club with the right lie and balance, both adjusted to the physical conformation of the player, given, also, a measured swing back and a follow through to match, success is assured.

A shot within one club's length of the flag counted five, within two four, and so on to a radius of five club lengths, outside of this—no count. A great conception! And I improved it by tying five little bits of red twill into a string, at distances of a club's length, and attaching it to the flag-pole, so that you had only to take the string in a circle round the stick to see what you had scored after each successive effort with the six balls. I used a bridge marker to keep the score, but determined to order proper scoring blocks at my stationer's.

A fascinating game. And I regretted that I had not a congenial soul to practise with me. At eleven, having steadily improved upon my original score, I went indoors and took some refreshment, a glass of shandygaff. I sat by the open window and thought how enchanting this simple open-air life was. I had been up for four hours employing myself usefully, whereas in London, if I had gone to bed late, I might only have just been dresesd, if that. There is a deal to be said for living in the country, even by yourself. I am confident that Geoff will not be able to give me a stroke a hole when he comes down.

I went back to the meadow after reading the paper (a sad waste of time) and writing two letters. I was feeling the strain a little. One doesn't begin to live at this pace in London until the day is well advanced. At high noon I thought it was time for another go with my mashie and the six balls.

In the meadow, mashie in hand, stood Ursula.

She greeted me irresistibly :

" How is Uncle Jim this morning ? "

V

I believe I blushed with pleasure. There is something endearing about a young girl who shows her liking for an elderly man. No taint of the coquette ! Agatha had warned me, quite unnecessarily, against the beguilements of young women who might be my own daughters. She hinted the other day that I had reached the dangerous age when men make senile idiots of themselves. And, she added, I remember, much to my annoyance, that the scarcity of young men had turned a lot of little maids into minxes. I can form my own conclusions upon this subject without assistance or advice, however well meant, from anybody.

" Uncle Jim is in great form," I replied heartily.

She begged me to pass judgment on her mashie, a sorry weapon, badly balanced. As a timely grant in aid, I presented her with mine, having its twin in my bag. It is wise to have two mashies. I have hurled a mashie after a ball and broken it. Human, as you will agree.

We essayed together my new practice game. She beat me in the first contest, accusing me engagingly of letting her win, which was far from the truth. The ground was roughish, and her balls kicked off with extraordinary luck towards the flag, whereas mine seemed to kick away from it. I asked her to take pot-luck with us at luncheon. Peabody rolled the ground while we were at luncheon, and in the afternoon we played about equally. I thoroughly enjoyed being with her; it was quite as rejuvenating as being with Matilda and Jemima, to whom I have got so used that I hate being long without them. The children joined us in the meadow after luncheon, and we were as happy as the larks singing above our heads.

Incidentally—God forbid that I should pump any young lady—Ursula further enlightened me about her father and herself. She appeared to know just about as much or as little about him as I did. I could see that this distressed her. She told me that she "ran" the big house, ordered dinner, bought supplies and all that. Rather a heavy responsibility for a mere child, but she seemed to be equal to it. She mentioned that we were to be invited to dinner. At this moment she spoke of her mother. I was rather glad that Agatha was not with us. It is important that

I should dwell with some insistence upon what she said in view of what later on landed me in such a quagmire of perplexities and difficulties. I had said that I looked forward to dining at Old Hall, because, having met her father, I was now hoping to see a portrait of her mother.

" But there isn't one," said Ursula.

The pathos in her voice undid me. I remained silent. Ursula went on nervously :

" My mother died when I was a baby. I can't remember her. Father never speaks of her. We lived in Yorkshire. Mother is buried there, but I have never seen her grave."

I took her hand and pressed it sympathetically. At once she brightened.

" It seems so funny. I—I have no relations."

I played up.

" Tch ! Tch ! You have a new uncle, and he's uncommonly proud of his niece, let me tell you."

That was all, and quite enough, too. Really it confirmed my conviction that a very unhappy man had never recovered from the loss of his wife. Still, making due allowances, I felt more pity for the daughter than for the father. Evidently grief had hardened him.

I will set down one more sidelight on Allen's character. Ursula, not I, spoke of the obscure disease which he had contracted in South America. And she spoke proudly :

" He came back, last time, desperately ill. He is ever so much better, and he has discovered some antitoxin that may make him famous."

" Would he like to be famous ? "

" Uncle Jim, how sharp you are. He cares nothing about fame. But what he has discovered might save innumerable lives. He has told me so. That counts with him."

At luncheon, Agatha spoke lightly of Geoff's week-end visit. Jemima piped up :

" You will love Geoff, Ursula ; he is a darling."

" When he has his own way," added Matilda, with one of her unexpected gleams of humour.

" I'm sure you bully your brother," said Ursula.

" We shouldn't dare ; he's a doctor," chirped Jemima.

" He might give us something," added Matilda.

Agatha silenced them with a Fairchild Family glance ; but she improved the opportunity by telling Ursula about Geoff's scholarship and other achievements. In my opinion good wine needs no bush. Ursula, however, innocently enough, checked the maternal flow :

" Does he play tennis ? "

Jemima answered her.

" He played for Cambridge."

Ursula was awed.

" Oh, dear ! " she exclaimed. " And I'm such a rabbit."

" Geoffrey," said Agatha majestically, "is looking forward to meeting Mr. Allen and discussing with him bacteria."

But Ursula never rose to the fly.

" Oh dear," she ejaculated for the second time. " I wish Mr. Geoffrey wasn't a doctor."

"Why, my dear?"

"Because father, oddly enough, hates doctors."

Mr. Allen. *Chapter III*

I

I SEE by my diary that we dined at Old Hall on the Thursday preceding Geoffrey's week-end visit. Agatha contemplated flight to London, but my common sense prevailed over her prejudice. I told her that she ought to accompany me in Geoffrey's interest. She pretended not to understand what I meant. Indeed she accused me of being a matchmaker, although I can swear on my honour that the idea of a possible mating between Ursula and Geoff would never have entered my mind had she not put it there. Then, and not till then, it burgeoned. The child is just the wife I would choose for my nephew. Indeed, I have soaped his ways to her innocent heart with a subtlety which pleases me, although I have been careful not to sing his praises indiscreetly, as Agatha is too prone to do.

The dinner at Old Hall was excellent and the wine sound. Perhaps I liked Allen better in his own house than on my lawn, but within ten minutes I had decided that his house and he had nothing in common. I mean by that that the man had not the right setting. Obviously, he had instructed some good London firm to decorate and furnish

Old Hall. There were no family pictures, no books, no china. The silver bore no crest. During dinner, our host talked well, as Agatha had to admit, but he never mentioned people. He belonged to no London clubs. Deliberately, so I came to the conclusion, he avoided all that comes under the head of "personalities." His detachment confirmed my convictions that he was incapable of attachment as humdrum folks interpret the word. For instance, when Ursula spoke to us about matters of local interest, Allen became not bored, but indifferent. He exhibited no pride whatever in our dear little hostess. Alone with me, after the ladies had left the dining-room, he didn't even mention her. I ventured to say something pleasant about the child, and her capacity for inspiring affection, but he cut me short, not rudely, you understand—the man's habitual courtesy is a trifle disconcerting—but as if all that sort of thing could be taken for granted.

"I am happy," said he, "that she is happy with you."

He did not look happy. I had to remind myself that he was giving free board and lodging to some pestilent microbe.

The establishment was on a considerable scale for a man and his daughter living alone. A butler and a footman served us at dinner, and the big drawing-room was filled with flowers. Ursula wore a frock that made Agatha blink, and which impressed me, little as I take notice of such garments.

But I do notice ornaments.

Ursula happened to be wearing a small miniature, surrounded by tiny brilliants. In a modest way I collect miniatures and I know something about them. It occurred to me that an old-fashioned pendant might be a family heirloom. It would have been natural enough to ask a question about it at dinner, but I didn't. After dinner, in the drawing-room, my opportunity came. Allen was speaking to Agatha about his flowers; I found myself beside Ursula.

"You are wearing a lovely miniature," I said.

"Do you like it? So do I, because," her voice dropped to a whisper, "my mother wore it; it belonged to her."

She detached it from a thin platinum chain and handed it to me.

"Ozias Humphrey," I exclaimed.

"Surely not; it is a portrait of a young woman."

"I mean Ozias Humphrey painted it; I know his work well. This is a valuable miniature."

"Is it? Father gave it to me with some other trinkets. I—I asked him who the young woman was. He couldn't tell me."

"But surely," said I, "this is a family miniature. I can detect a likeness to you. This smiling lady may have been your great grandmother."

"Perhaps; I should love to think so."

I turned the miniature over. At the back of it softly gleamed a tress of dark hair, exquisitely braided. Each tiny braid was held in place by a diminutive diamond.

A fool could see that here was a lady of quality and position. Ursula said:

" When did—er—— ? "

" Ozias Humphrey ? "

" Yes—when did he live ? "

I told her, more or less accurately ; dates keep best in a notebook. Why overburden the mind with them ?

" A young and charming woman," I observed.

" But she has grey hair, Uncle Jim."

" Powder, my dear, powder. Yes ; she might have been your great-grandmother, or great-great-great-aunt."

I glanced at the rim. Often names and dates are found on the gold rim of miniatures, inscribed in the smallest script. I found nothing. Ursula hung the pendant on its chain. We talked of something else, but I did most of the prattling. The child seemed slightly absent-minded. I accounted for this adequately on leaving. Ursula followed Agatha and me into the hall. As she shook my hand at parting she pressed into it the miniature.

" Please find out all you can about it," she whispered.

I was surprised and pleased. We had a little secret between us, and a job quite after my own heart had been innocently imposed upon me. I squeezed her soft little hand as a sign of acquiescence.

II

It occurs to me that this narrative is not being constructed upon those rigid lines of continuity which ought to distinguish, let us say, dramatic work. But, in a sense, I am trying to establish my characters after my own fashion. I ought to have introduced Crowhurst before, but no matter.

Crowhurst is the local doctor, and a very good fellow. I had not seen him at church on Sunday, but he called early in the week, and I liked him at sight. This, perhaps, is a weakness of mine, but I prefer to think well of my fellowmen. I seemed to know Crowhurst intimately after spending an hour with him, for he appeared to be the true type of country doctor, not overstrained by too big a practice; and there wasn't much to know about him that didn't appear on the surface. We had a game of golf together, next day, and he beat me three up, playing level. He was loud in his satisfaction of having somebody to play with, and evidently ready to give me the whole of his friendship.

"The wife will call in a day or two," he told me. "But the fact is we're overrun with tabbies in and about Yeldham, and have got out of the way of meeting people you can enjoy yourself with. We knew the Berridges would be on you like flies, and gave 'em a chance of settling first. We, the wife and I, are not bound up in church tape."

He laughed jovially, as became a man of ingratiating rotundities, rosy of countenance, with a smack of the sportsman about him. He told me that he hunted once a week during the season, and enjoyed a day's shooting when it came his way.

Of course he spoke of Allen, and not disagreeably.

"Our Squire has given me a miss."

I remembered what Ursula had said about her father hating doctors, and wisely held my tongue. Crowhurst went on lightly:

"They say that Allen holds medical degrees. I dare say. But I can't run him to ground in a directory. That's nothing. He is recognised as a sort of authority in his own line. It isn't my line. A G. P. has no time to fuss with a microscope. Allen is secretive about his work. I don't blame him. As a matter of fact, I have never been into his laboratory. About the only link between us is Ursula. I saw her through various infantile complaints. To-day, she is as healthy a young woman as I know."

"But rather forlorn," I murmured.

"Just so—just so. None of my business, still——" He paused and I gave him time.

"Bag of mystery—Allen," he blurted out. "And yet, if one knew the facts, one might be sorry for him. He must have been bludgeoned."

"What makes you say that?"

Crowhurst summed up the situation.

"Oh, well, there was a deal of talk after he first came here. Curiosity died of inanition. For donkeys' years there has been nothing to resurrect it. We have never known anything about him; about his private life, I mean. He arrived with a small girl, after buying Old Hall. He planted her with the Berridges and vanished. From time to time he reappeared, thin and gaunt, a bit of a scarecrow. He wanted to be left alone; we left him alone. We went on guessing. The child knew just what we did—nothing. That started the cackle—her ignorance of her own father and everything relating to his life before he came here. My own conjecture——"

"Yes——?"

"Has a tincture of probability about it. He lost his wife. She may have bolted from him; she may be dead."

"She is dead and buried in Yorkshire. Ursula told me so."

Crowhurst whistled.

"Told you that, did she? Then, all I can say is, that this small bit of information has come to her lately. As a child she never knew her mother's maiden name. Lord! How the tabbies purred over that! Anyway, some sort of shock must have unbalanced Allen. From my slight acquaintance with him, I have no hesitation in saying that he belongs to the noble army of the don't-care-a-damns. But—a very big 'but'—such a man might exercise extraordinary precautions to spare his daughter disagreeable information. Yes, yes, I am certain that the clue to the mystery—if there is a mystery—is bound up in the late Mrs. Allen, buried in her grave, in Yorkshire, you say?"

"Ursula said so."

"My hypothesis would account for everything."

At this my heart warmed to him, and I was sorry Agatha didn't hear him. Half the trouble in this jolly old world arises out of imputing evil to others. A vision was vouchsafed me of Allen with a halo.

Crowhurst said more, but not at that time. He confirmed my impression that Allen was a rich man.

" He spends a lot of money, Mr. Pollen."

" At Old Hall ? "

" No—upon his various expeditions. We do know something about them, thanks to our omniscient penny press. He chartered a steamer to go up the Amazon ; he must have watered the waste places of the earth with a rain of gold."

This pleased me. Somehow I liked to think that Allen was not a pincher. And Crowhurst had expressed himself well. I made a mental note of his phrase.

After that, so far as I remember, Allen dropped out of our talk.

III

I said nothing to Agatha about this miniature. Dr. George Williamson's big book on Ozias Humphrey was in my flat in London. I hoped to find in that book a complete list of all the better known people whom Humphrey had painted. There might be—it was improbable—a reproduction of this valuable pendant.

That night I examined it carefully.

In my own small collection I have now and again taken miniatures from their frames and found at the back of them names and dates. Often there is a thin slip of paper giving this important information.

I was tempted to take this miniature from its valuable setting, and, had it been my own property, I should have done so. Finally, I put the thing away in my dressing-case, deciding that I ought to ask permission of Ursula first. My fingers, too, are not, like Geoffrey's fingers, accustomed to delicate manipulation. Geoffrey—if Ursula agreed—should take the precious object out of its frame.

The boy arrived on Friday night.

He looked well, but slightly overworked. The children welcomed him uproariously.

At dinner, much to his mother's annoyance, he talked insistently about Allen. Allen was a marvel. Allen had made Harley Street sit up and howl! That, in itself, was a great achievement. Harley Street, so it transpired, had howled in vain for a personal acquaintance. The Geographical Society, so Geoff added, was also howling for Allen. They had invited him to lecture before them—and he had refused.

"Must be a queer card," affirmed Geoffrey.

"He is," said Agatha, "and the queerest thing about him is that he has a sweet daughter. Such men ought not to marry."

Geoff replied cheerfully:

"You may be right there, mother. When a fellow has big work to do, it's going to take all his time and attention to do it."

Obviously Geoff believed that he himself had big work to do. I could see him, when Ursula's name was mentioned, dismissing her as negligible. Being an optimist, I hoped for the best, but I had warned Agatha privately not to cram the child down his throat.

" Is it likely that I should do that ? "

" More than likely."

We had arranged a tennis party for the Saturday afternoon. I am a rabbit, like the children, but Crowhurst goes in for tournaments and all that. Crowhurst was quite looking forward to shivering a racquet with Geoff.

" Has he time for tennis ? " asked Geoffrey.

" A man," replied Agatha, too tartly, " who does not find time for necessary relaxation is an idiot."

One up for Agatha, but I should have expressed myself with less acrimony.

Over a glass of port I hinted to the boy not to expect too much from Allen. It was more than likely that they would not meet this week-end.

" He doesn't love doctors," I said.

" Quite right too. You see, Uncle Jim, there is such damnable jealousy in the profession, and a coagulated lot of prejudice, too. The specialists are the worst. Hidebound to the *n*th degree. Allen, of course, shies away from them. He knows jolly well that the few men travelling along his line of research would suck his brains if they could. And the others, the ruck, are colossally ignorant about his particular job."

" And what is his particular job ? "

" The antitoxins. It would bore you stiff if I jawed about them."

" True," I admitted. " Have another glass of port ? "

" No—I ration myself to one—must keep fit. You've given me a fine start, Uncle Jim, and I hope I'm making the most of it."

He told me, with becoming modesty, that his stock was booming (his expression). I was not surprised. Geoff has a way with him. He never obtrudes his cleverness, but it's there right enough. Good looks are an immense asset to a doctor. There is nothing of the Belvedere Apollo about Geoff. In a beauty competition for men (we shall be having that next, I fear) he might get a " highly commended " label—nothing more, if that. No; he is good-looking in the real sense; he looks a *good* chap, sound at core as a pippin, alert, active and sympathetic. Agatha says that women are attracted to Geoff, because he doesn't make love to them, and treats them with old-fashioned deference. No woman ever had a better son, considerate, unselfish, and consistently jolly, humouring her little foibles, and making much of her. Certainly she has trained him in the way a son should go. Re-reading what I have written about my sister, I am assailed by misgivings that I have not done justice to her more sterling qualities. My mistake! Slight bickerings between brother and sister—husband and wife, for that matter—are really proof of solid affection.

Our little tennis party was a distinct success, slightly clouded (for me) because poor Jemima was in disgrace. With surprising initiative, she had crawled under her mother's four-poster, when she ought to have been sound asleep, and grabbed

Agatha by the leg just as she was stepping into bed. This incident would not have taken place if I, quite innocently, had not planted the adventurous seed in Jemima's brain. I had perpetrated the same sort of harmless joke upon a maiden aunt, when I was a ripe ten, and very stupidly I told the tale to Jemima. She had to take luncheon (her dinner) at the side-table, and watered Irish stew with tears. Agatha had forbidden her to appear on the lawn, which meant no Ursula for Jemima, but Geoff and I between us got this further punishment condoned.

Crowhurst brought his wife, a substantial helpmeet (with a punishing overhand service). The Berridges came to tea. Ursula arrived early, without her father, whom we had asked to join us if he had nothing better to do.

This pleasant afternoon turned out to be a triumph for Agatha. Geoff cottoned to Ursula, just as I did, at sight. He is like me in many ways, and much more of a Pollen than a Willing. At his age I was consumed by ambitions, which—so Agatha says—were abandoned when I inherited the Lord Mayor's money. Well, I cheered Agatha up by remarking that Geoff would not come into *his* uncle's money, so long as I could prevent it.

Yes ; Geoff was captured lock, stock and barrel. And I enjoyed my own little triumph, when, later on, he rated his mother for not saying more about such a dear girl. At this, Agatha actually winked at me, a sort of accolade, inasmuch as I had rubbed it in, as I have said, that good wine needs no bush. Geoff and Ursula defeated the Crowhursts in three sets running. When Ursula said to him: "You are a wonderful partner," he beamed at her. I find this note in my diary: "All is going well."

IV

A premature entry. All was not going well.

Ursula spent Sunday afternoon with us. It would be more correct to set down that she spent the afternoon with Geoff. She couldn't escape from him—the thruster! I looked on chortling, unable to determine whether or not she was attracted by him. Agatha says now, after all these harassing events, that she wasn't; and I defer to her considered opinion. Matilda affirmed that Ursula wanted to play with her and Jemima. At dinner Geoff never mentioned Allen, except to remark that Ursula's father must be the right sort——!

I return to the miniature.

I showed it to Geoff after Agatha had gone to bed. He was interested, even professionally so, because he made positive that the powdered lady must be a blood relation of Ursula's. Two days previously, Ursula had begged me to take the miniature out of its setting. And I had told her that I would entrust this delicate piece of work to Geoffrey.

As I had hoped, we found at the back of it a name and a date.

" Ursula Venner."

Venner, as a patronymic, conveyed nothing to Geoff. But something tinkled in my memory. I had heard the name before, where and when escaped me. I thought at once of hunting the name up in some directory, but our " Who's Who " and Sir Bernard Burke's invaluable volume were in London.

We carefully replaced the miniature in its frame. none the worse for Geoff's manipulation, and, as a matter of fact, I handed it to Ursula within twenty-four hours. Geoff left Yeldham for London early next morning.

Ursula had never heard the name.

I dared not suggest that she should question her father. Indeed, by this time (thanks to Crowhurst) I felt slightly uneasy in conscience. Was I trespassing upon holy ground ?

It transpired afterwards that Ursula did not question her father, sorely tempted as she must have been to do so. We set about our daily mashie practice, and Ursula never once mentioned Geoff. That might be the best of signs, or the worst. Either way I thought it prudent to focus my attention upon the mashie practice. Ursula knew that Geoff was coming to stay with us for a whole month. There had been some talk of their playing together in a tennis tournament. I decided that the matter must rest for the moment upon the knees of the gods.

Had I guessed what tricks the gods were about to play on me, I should, I think, have brained myself with a niblick !

I find nothing in my diary about the week that followed except this: I saw something, not much, of Allen. Agatha says that there is a touch of Stevenson's Utterson in me, and when she says that she means to be complimentary. Utterson, it may be recalled, was on good terms with the unhappy Jekyll. I can't think now of Allen without associating him in my mind with Jekyll and Hyde.

We took a long walk together.

After that walk I thought to myself: "This poor lonely fellow really craves some sort of companionship." He talked about himself. Agatha says I'm a good listener, which is true enough when I'm interested, and Allen was dwelling with an enthusiasm and vividness which I cannot attempt to reproduce upon his South American experiences. He had hardly escaped with his life from certain appalling swamps in equatorial forests—*and he was lusting to go back.*

As he talked I began to realise what the call of the wild may be to some men. He admitted—even granting that he purged his system of the form of malaria that ravaged him—the danger of such a return, and then he touched lightly upon the expense. At this point my deeper interest was stimulated. Because he spoke of treasure to be found by the intrepid explorer. I recall this sentence:

"I give you my word, Pollen, that I counted confidently upon discovering some obscure tribe of savages using cooking utensils made of gold—gold."

" You are after gold ? "

He eyed me with sharp suspicion, but I am sensible that what he saw reassured him.

" Gold," he said impatiently, " is a synonym for power. I have been crippled for lack of gold. Livingstone would have said the same. I found gold, but it was useless to me, because I couldn't get at it." Here he became too technical for me. He continued in a hard voice : " And my men died like flies."

This evidently was a grievance—*His men died like flies*. But a second afterwards I had to reconsider a too hasty conclusion that he didn't care a damn whether they died or not. He went on incisively :

" If I can cure myself, I can cure them, poor devils. That is the work I have in hand now."

He compared himself to Moses in sight of the promised land, but without self-pity. Indeed he seemed to be raging against circumstances too strong for mortal man. From his rapid, slightly disjointed talk, it was impossible for me to guess what he was actually after. Was it the fame that attaches itself to such names as Speke and Burton and Stanley ? Or was it treasure ? I have always imagined treasure hunting to be the most thrilling sport in the world. Listening to Allen, my imagination was so wrought upon that, despite the horrors of the Amazon jungle—the poisonous insects, snakes, wild beasts and wilder men—I might have been persuaded to join him *if he went back*.

To "go back" was his obsession, so marked, so overwhelming, that I wondered whether he was quite sane. His strange eyes glittered; his prehensile fingers shook with excitement.

Suffice it to add that I was somewhat flattered. He had let himself rip for me. And he told me before we parted that he was feeling much relieved.

"Speech is a queer thing, Pollen. I have held my tongue for weeks at a time; then I have jabbered away at natives in English which they didn't understand. There is nobody here whom I can talk to."

I mentioned Crowhurst. Allen said derisively:

"My God! Crowhurst——!"

"But why not? A sound type."

"Yes—cut to pattern, one to every parish in the kingdom. Men like Crowhurst would confine me in the nearest lunatic asylum if I talked to them. To the devil with them!"

He was superb in his wrath, and colour flowed into his pallid face. As a young man he must have been handsome, but "gey hard" for any woman to live with.

As I took leave of him at the park gates, I spoke of Geoffrey. He nodded carelessly. I surmised that Ursula had probably mentioned my nephew to him, but he did not confirm this.

"A doctor is he? A specialist?"

I told him that Geoffrey was a sort of junior partner of Lansbury, the throat and ear man.

"Throat and ear, eh? With Lansbury? He's in luck, this nephew of yours. These specialists feather their nests. Bring him to see me, if he cares to come."

"Cares——! If you could have heard the boy at dinner the other night——! He enlightened us about you—— could talk of nobody else. He's mad keen to meet you."

"I fear he will be disappointed," he replied grimly but politely.

I left him and it at that, hoping that Geoff would inspire liking in Ursula's father. Honest admiration cuts a lot of ice; and Allen, unless I was much mistaken, had a weak spot. The glad acclaim touched it. When he was describing to me some of the incredible hardships which he had endured patiently, I ventured to applaud. It pleased him. He would resent, I am sure, the grosser forms of flattery; he seemed strangely indifferent to the recognition he had already won, but my sincere appreciation of him, as an explorer, provoked thanks, oddly phrased:

"I am much obliged to you, but I have not done what I set out to do."

V

I apologise for this inadequate record. It would take the pen of a Conrad to do justice to such a man as Allen. I remember that I returned home feeling that I had shrunk. The fellow's indomitable will, the triumph of his mind over a body weakened by disease, his terrific " drive," if I may use a hunting term about a hunter, confounded a mere *homunculus*. That is how this colossus regarded me; that is how I regarded myself.

What an amazing father of such a girl as Ursula!

Was he her father?

Later on, the hypercritic will say scornfully that this thought came to me after certain events. Not so. It came upon the eve of those events, as my diary testifies. The thought expanded imaginatively. I beheld Allen, as a young man, married to a pretty woman. I could only envisage her as a dim replica of Ursula. Crowhurst was right. *She had bludgeoned him.* Allen had been too much for her. She had turned to some other man. There always is another man round the corner. Possibly she had died in giving birth to this other man's child. That would account for everything that puzzled me and all Yeldham. It was incredible that such a man as Allen would not have stamped his paternity upon his own child. And there was absolutely nothing in Ursula that could have come from Allen.

Naturally, I kept this very reasonable hypothesis to myself. Had I told Agatha she would have been shocked. I could hear her saying: " Heavens! Ursula is a love-child!" So she was, bless her. And in Allen's abnormal make-up, love was conspicuously absent.

Had I read the riddle aright?

That question will be found in my diary, after I had jotted down my impressions of this eventful afternoon.

Mr. Allen *Chapter IV*

I

THIS is as good a place as any to set down a letter from Geoff, which I received on the Thursday. It pleased me, because obviously he had been a spendthrift of his time, and on the eve of his holiday he had no time to spend.

29a, Wimpole Street, W.

Dear Uncle Jim—

I have plenty to tell you about the Venners, Ursula V. is mentioned in Williamson's book on Humphrey. He painted her right enough. And W. has a foot-note. "A noted beauty." So far, so good. The Venners, up to recent years, were a famous Yorkshire family, and lived at Venner Hall in the East Riding. But there is no mention of them in the current "Upper Ten" at my club. However, I found in the library of the Oxford and Cambridge an ancient "Landed Gentry" which had a page and a half about them. It was so ancient that there could be no mention of our Ursula in it, but the lady of the miniature was there. She was born a Malahide, and married a Venner. I take it that the miniature was painted soon after her marriage. I dipped too into the County History *of Yorkshire, where I found good browsing. The Venners, like so many old families, seem to have slowly petered out during the last fifty years. The lady of the miniature seems to have introduced the name Ursula, because I have found two more little bears. In the half-dozen books I have glanced at the name of Allen is not to be found, and the last of the Venners of Venner Hall married her cousin. These two people must have been alive about twenty years ago.*

I am looking forward immensely to my holiday. After all, as Mother rubbed it into me, a man is an idiot who can't see beyond his own profession.

Your affectionate nephew,
Geoff.

P.S.—I have reopened this letter to tell you that Venner Court was sold to some cotton-spinning magnate in 1908. *Coincidence is a queer thing. I happened by chance to meet a pal at my club, who has a place in Yorkshire, but in the West Riding. He had never known any Venners, and never heard of Allen, but he had shot pheasants at Venner Hall last year.*

This letter gave me something to think about, but thought foundered in a quicksand of speculation. Was it possible that Allen might be the cousin who married the last of the Venners. Who had sold Venner Hall? That could be found out easily enough. The name bothered me. I had heard it before. In vain I hunted for the key which unlocks those cells in our memories which Time closes upon us.

I did not show Geoff's letter to Ursula. I had to respect my neighbour's reserves or preserves. Could I poach upon them ? Certainly not. So I told Ursula the simple truth. Her powdered lady was a certain Mrs. Venner, who had been painted by Ozias Humphrey. She accepted this information gratefully for what it was worth.

Really the arrival of Geoffrey on the following Saturday put the Venners out of my mind. He asked, almost ardently, after Ursula when I met him at the station. Neither then nor afterwards did he speak of the Venner heiress, although I thanked him for the trouble he had taken. I think he understood from my manner that I was not the man to pry into business that did not concern me. Also, I have all a middle-aged person's sense of the ridicule that attaches itself to mares' nests.

Geoffrey, like his uncle, beats no bushes. As we scuttled over the tar-mac, side by side in my car, he said abruptly :

" Uncle Jim, I'm in love."

The old car nearly skidded.

" Of course you are," said I.

" She's a perfect darling, isn't she ? "

" Not perfect, I hope, my boy, but a darling, yes."

He pressed my arm affectionately.

He continued, jerkily :

" I squirm when I think of her as an heiress."

" Tchah ! " said I. " Think of her as a healthy young woman to be wooed and won."

" I do—I do."

Speaking not without experience in such delicate affairs, I gave him some advice :

" Humanly speaking, you are the first, Geoff. Be bold ! "

" I never felt so shy in my life."

" I repeat—be bold ! Young Lochinvar is my idea of a lover. Go for the goods, provided you are sure they are the goods, and God bless you ! "

Lord Chesterfield might have used my words had he lived in this inelegant century.

The advice of age was not accepted unhesitatingly by youth.

" Your psychology, Uncle Jim, may be unsound. A girl may take the last man who proposes to her instead of the first."

I did not gainsay this. The truth is I was overwhelmed with joy at mere sight of Geoff's glowing face. Instead of arguing, I put a leading question :

" What does it feel like, Geoff, to be in love ? "

" Love," replied Geoff, " is the cohesion of irresistible impulses."

Not bad, for a young man of six-and-twenty.

As we sped along, he spoke of Allen :

" If he dislikes me——? You said he hated doctors."

" He does hate the cut-and-dried G.P. I shall take you to Old Hall to-morrow afternoon. If you can manage it, draw out Allen about his experiences on the upper waters of the Amazon. Don't be psychological ! Avoid shop. Absurd as it may appear, Allen unbends with me. He may unbend with you."

We were in sight of Mote Farm as I spoke.

II

Agatha is certainly a woman of surprises. She has definitely taken up the position that this potential match between Geoffrey and Ursula is of *my* making.

More—she has changed her mind about Allen. The three of us sauntered up to Old Hall on Sunday afternoon, and Agatha, I am sure, being at heart a sensible, practical woman, decided that she had been too hasty in her judgments. We all believe what we want to believe. It is true that I had reported to her at some length my long talk with the man; and possibly pity flowed into Agatha's heart. Geoffrey, probably, was as candid with his mother as he had been with me in regard to his feelings for Ursula. He accompanied us to church. He is not so regular a church-goer as Agatha could wish, and the same may be said of me, so when he proposed going with us, a trifle shamefacedly, I could put only one interpretation upon it.

During the course of our visit to Old Hall, Agatha introduced, tactfully enough, our uncle, the Lord Mayor, to Allen. She observed afterwards, with a faint blush, that it was well for the squire of the parish to know that we were above the common herd. Allen was not impressed. Perhaps he is one of those rare birds who soar high above Lord Mayors. Anyhow he was civil to Geoffrey. I'm wondering whether he will raise any objections to him as a son-in-law. The boy couldn't do much better from a merely material point of view, nor could the girl, considering how few chances she has, poor child, of meeting eligible young men. I did my bit too, introducing the Eighteenth Century to my host. I have a natural fund of small talk and a wide knowledge of the world. My experience of the social manners of my particular period has impressed scholars of repute. Allen is not a scholar, so I fear that my observations fell upon indifferent ears.

The main point to drive home is this : our visit was a success. Dear little Ursula said some pleasant things to me :

" I'm so glad you have come here, Uncle Jim. I love being with the children, and of course I couldn't be long with them without seeing how they adore you. I've never known anybody so kind or so easy to get on with. You know you're really rather like a child yourself."

She gave a tiny bubbling laugh.

" A man ought to be a child at heart," said I, " if he's a decent sort, as I hope I am. The serious brainwork that I am engaged upon is apt to take it out of me when I'm alone. Your companionship has been enchanting, child. I like a quiet life but not a dull life."

Little did I guess what was ahead of me !

For a man who has strolled leisurely through the Eighteenth Century, browsing here and there, the fox-trot style in this narrative rather distresses me. I have played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt and Lamb, but would these accomplished gentlemen have written as they did—*now* ? Certainly not. Let me jazz on.

During my too short talk with Ursula that afternoon she thanked me again for the trouble I had taken with the miniature. The right sort of girl invariably exaggerates such small services. Then she said gravely that she had not asked her father if the Venners were of kin.

" But why not ? " I demanded.

She answered me nervously :

" You see, long ago, when I wanted to know if we had any relations, he replied decidedly : ' None.' "

" And yet, your mother, you say, was buried in Yorkshire, and the Venners were an old Yorkshire family."

" I know . . . I know. I have been thinking of nothing else. Isn't it likely, Uncle Jim, that father may have quarrelled with my mother's people ? Perhaps they objected to his going off on his expeditions and leaving her alone. I'm—I'm only guessing. Is it wrong of me to guess ? "

What could I say in reply ? I comforted her to the best of my ability.

" You are the sole judge of that, my dear. If questions from you, however innocent, distress Mr. Allen, it would be considerate and wise not to ask them. In due time, when you are older, he may give you his full confidence."

"I hope he will," she said earnestly.

III

During the next fortnight the sun shone serene in our heavens. We played tennis, golf, and visited points of interest in our car. Ursula was with us most of the time. I think I am justified in recording that Geoff "dashed" at her. Well, well, excess speed in a gallant lover is not surprising. Personally, I have no use for laggards. Some of our anæmic youngsters step gingerly into love, as if it were a too hot bath.

Anyway, the boy proposed—handsomely, I'm sure—and was refused.

I consoled him, fatuously, I dare say, because I was much upset.

"There's another man, Uncle Jim."

"Nonsense."

"Almost she admitted it. I couldn't press the point, could I?"

"No. If you are right, who the devil can it be?"

For a minute or two we tumbled over each other in a quagmire of doubt and perplexity. Geoff wanted to pack his traps and be off. I forbade this peremptorily.

"We must go slow," I counselled. "Frankly, Geoff, I don't believe in this other fellow. You have frightened an innocent maid?"

" Are there any left ? " he asked with a gleam of humour.

Of course the truth leaked out. Agatha had to be told. Matilda and Jemima, considering their tender years, are sharp as needles.

For twenty-four hours we stewed in our own juices. I dislike the expression, but I can think of none better. Then Jemima, with her sausage curls a-flutter, threw a new and blinding light upon my darkness. She had been sent to bed early, one of Agatha's Victorian punishments for trivial offences. I had crept upstairs to kiss her. She was sitting up in bed grinning.

" I knew you'd come," she said.

From the expression of her face I made no doubt that she was planning fresh mischief. Sending me to bed at an hour when I was not ready for sleep always had that effect on me.

" May I sit on your knee, darling ? I have a great secret to tell you."

We shared many secrets.

She hopped out of bed, and popped on to my knees.

" Uncle Jim, I know that Ursula has put it across Geoff."

" Tch ! Tch ! If little girls insist upon talking slang, I shall slip off."

" No, you won't. 'Cos why ? I know, yes, I do, why she won't have Geoff."

" Bless my stars ! "

" Shall I tell you ? Shall I ? "

She wriggled with excitement. I could feel her tiny heart throbbing against a not too well laundered shirt front. Country laundries are—Bother these irrelevancies!

I said nervously:

"I see no reason why you shouldn't tell me, if you really know."

"I do know. You won't tell, if I tell you? Promise!"

A sort of pledge was wrung from me.

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun."

"Well, Ursula doesn't want Geoff, 'cos she wants you. And I don't blame her a bit, there!"

"Good night," I said severely.

She gripped me. I could not have released myself without an unseemly struggle, which would have hurt her.

"Matilda was fiendishly jealous, Uncle Jim. You promised to marry her once, and live in a tree, but Matilda and I know now that uncles can't marry nieces, worse luck! Ursula gave herself dead away to—US."

I muttered feebly: "Nonsense."

"But why shouldn't you marry Ursula? There is a very suitable difference in age between you." She was quoting her mother. "Ursula fell in love with you long before Geoff came. *We spotted that.* You are always telling us to use our eyes and ears. *We did.* Ursula threw herself at your head. When we accused her of it, she didn't deny it. There!"

"Don't say 'there.' It irritates me."

She went on:

"And you encouraged her; yes, you did; and you know it. I'm afraid you're a sad flirt, and just as sure as eggs are eggs you've broken the poor girl's heart."

She spoke with conviction, and I—well, I was "downscrambled." I came across this odd word in the New Forest, and made a note of it.

Yes—downscrambled.

I put the imp back into bed, and kissed her.

"Now, Jemima, you have imposed—I mean you have made me promise to keep this ridiculous secret to myself. You and Matilda must do the same."

"'Course we will. We ain't, *aren't*, proud of you, Uncle Jim. We're grievously ashamed and frightened. Ursula might drown herself. P'raps she will—in the Yeld. Then we could never fish in it any more. Matilda says you will do the right thing. We both hope so, 'cos you are a darling. If you weren't a darling, Ursula wouldn't have fallen in love with you."

I retreated, not quite according to plan.

IV

I crept downstairs and into my own den, a prey to the most dreadful misgivings, which a glance into a not too flattering mirror failed to mitigate. I tried to view myself with critical detachment. I suppose I do look young for my years. Women have told me so, but I salt-and-pepper such statements. I am forty-eight. Sometimes I feel it.

I felt it then. I have kept my hair, and there is none on my face, which, with the lights behind me, does take off ten years.

I sat down and filled a pipe. Geoff was playing rubicon bezique with Agatha. I was reasonably secure from interruption, unless Matilda rushed in. I dared not meet Matilda. Accordingly I locked the door. Matilda had been enjoined by Agatha to respect my hours of work.

Matilda did come to the door, and was refused admittance. Jemima and she will talk me over till they fall asleep.

I have taken all this from my diary, just as I wrote it down, piping hot, upon that abominable evening. I wanted to confront the facts in indelible ink.

I have written facts, because, I fear, I'm a conceited old fool, and a very self-centred ass, but calling myself names won't mend the situation. If all this is true—and children do have an uncanny gift of nosing out the truth—I ought to have protected a young, inexperienced girl not only against myself but against her own virgin sensibilities and budding emotions. I tried to recall all our happy talks together. She had captivated me with her freshness of outlook and joy in life. In an avuncular sense I had fallen in love with her.

In love . . . !

The years rolled back. In my salad days I had tumbled in and out of love half a dozen times. I was not in any position to marry then, because the Pollen money (made in trade) had not yet come to me.

One young woman let me down badly. I suffered acutely, but Time healed my wounds. Still, I can show my scars.

After a half-hour's futile reflection, I went back to the drawing-room where, much to my annoyance, my looks provoked comment from Agatha.

" Have you a headache, James ? "

I was a bit short. Agatha insisted upon my swallowing an asperin, and recommended bed, which I was beginning to think was the only fit place for me. Ten minutes later Geoffrey joined me, very white about the gills. I refrained from commenting upon his appearance.

" I know," said he, " what's wrong with you, uncle. You have found out."

These shocks at my age are more than I can bear. I have been wondering whether I ought to take the boy into my confidence. During the futile half-hour I had wriggled somehow to two conclusions. Either Ursula loved me or she didn't. In either case Geoff could go ahead at less speed. That was comforting.

" What have I found out ? " I gasped.

He replied calmly :

" That you are the other fellow." Without pausing for an answer, which certainly was not ready, he continued : " I had my suspicions before I proposed. I had no suspicions afterwards ; I knew. I'm awfully sorry for her, and even more sorry for you."

He spoke without a trace of bitterness.

" But it's preposterous."

"No it isn't. Perhaps, Uncle Jim, in some ways I'm an older man than you."

Was this impertinence or just youthful priggishness? I let it pass.

"For instance, I'm fairly well up in psychology; you aren't. You read novels; I read textbooks. In novels, the characters behave consistently. If they didn't, they would be damned as unconvincing. In real life people behave inconsistently. All doctors know that. The unexpected happens. As for love, I defined it to you as the cohesion of irresistible impulses. Not my own. I read that in a textbook. None of us are masters of our impulses. We like to think we are. In real life men and women, old and young, do and think the most impossible things. Ursula's impulses, quite apart from her normal, well-regulated code of conduct, drove her irresistibly to you, simply because—as you pointed out—you were the first man, *qua* man, to challenge her affection and admiration."

The stout oak boards of my bedroom floor seemed to be sinking beneath my feet. Nevertheless, I pulled myself together.

"I am forty-eight; she is eighteen."

"What of it? Madame Récamier inspired half a dozen passions after she had passed your age. We choose our friends, but love imposes itself, regardless of all the proprieties. Not my own again. I quote a sage."

"And you talk like one," I retorted. "For the sake of peace, spare me the opinion of others. If this absurd thing is true, what do you say about it as the man most interested ? ''

" I say that you ought to have married just such a girl as Ursula long ago. And it's not too late to do it now."

This, this from young Lochinvar. He was right. Let us search for consistency anywhere except in this world. With his next words he disarmed me.

" After all, you are the better man."

At that I gripped his hand, utterly at a loss for words. I indicated a chair, and sank back upon the sofa at the foot of my bed. And then I saw that tears were in his eyes.

I wiped my own.

When I could speak collectedly, I hastened to assure Geoff that my feelings towards Ursula were platonic. Because he was desperately in love with her himself, he accepted my assurance half-heartedly. Then I attempted to persuade him that he was mistaken, arguing—as persons so often argue—to convince myself. He made hay of my special pleading.

" Look here, Uncle Jim, it's not like you to shirk facts. We have to face 'em together and make the best of 'em. My suspicions were quickened when I noticed that Ursula always wanted to talk about you. And I did talk about you. When you were present, her glance lingered upon you. Of course I kidded myself that she did like you, platonically. Looking at her, I forgot the textbooks. But when I proposed, after half a dozen tries neatly stopped by her, she burst into tears. Why ? A jolly girl doesn't sob her heart out without good reason. She knew that she was up to her neck in trouble, that she stood between you and me. She saw clearly all that I couldn't see. Anyway, she was so distressed that I asked her point-blank if she cared for somebody else. Her silence, her confusion, answered the question. But even then, sure in my own mind that you were the man, I went on kidding myself that you couldn't be. And if you were, you would know it. When I told you that she had turned me down, you were so unaffectedly sorry for me, that it was obvious you didn't know it. The Lord knows how you found out."

Honest Injun or no Honest Injun, I had to tell him. A faint smile came and went.

"Poor Uncle Jim!"

We parted for the night soon after that without formulating any definite plan of campaign. I admit that I was worn out. We agreed, however, that we must mark time, a silly expression, inasmuch as Time marks us. Next morning, I noticed a wrinkled brow in my shaving-glass, and lines about the eyes and lips. I made a sorry breakfast.

V

Troubles—as the Swan of Avon observed—do come in battalions. I thought that I had had my share of trouble. And yet, so "undulant" is human nature—we have Montaigne's word for it—

that within twenty-four hours I had regained something of my habitual peace of mind. The possibility of marriage between myself and dear Ursula I dismissed as ridiculous. Natural relations would soon re-establish themselves. Then, Geoff could begin again. According to the novelists, a young girl whose emotions have been awakened by the wrong man is likely to turn quickly to the right man, if he is the right man.

Sustained by this reflection, I looked forward to meeting Ursula, and the sooner the better. But she kept away from us. Those wretched whelps, Matilda and Jemima, cast reproachful and indignant glances upon me, not, happily, in their mother's presence. If Agatha suspected anything, she kept it to herself, an act of self-abnegation greatly to her credit. Crowhurst was a tower of strength to Geoff and me. We played golf—Geoff playing our best ball. Incidentally, I nearly began a preface to my big book.

Life was becoming tolerable again, when the bolt fell.

After many months, the scene comes back with startling vividness. I was strolling up and down the bowling green with Geoff, after dinner. It was a fine moonlight night, warm and still. And yet now I'm chilled to the bone when I see a full moon, and am inclined to shake my fist at the cynic who lives in it.

I was talking over, I remember, our round of golf that afternoon, and I can swear that the name Venner had not been in my thoughts for more than a fortnight. Also, I was greatly cheered because Ursula had been playing with the children, and she had met Geoff and me without embarrassment, good, plucky girl. I felt as I do when I set foot on the Admiralty Pier at Dover after a rough crossing. At dinner, we had cracked a bottle of sound champagne.

The most absurd incident brought about the cataclysm. We had abandoned golf and had embarked upon a theme started by Geoff. He astonished me by affirming that few persons could run through the alphabet swiftly, without taking breath, and without blurring a single letter. He called it an exercise in articulation. I attempted the feat and failed. At least Geoff said I did. Then Geoff rattled it off, quite articulately, but he left out the " W," ending V.X.Y.Z.

" You left out the ' W.' "

" Did I ? How extraordinary ! One can't even say ' V ' without thinking of ' W.' A strange lapse of memory."

That did it.

That insignificant key unlocked my memory, subconsciously, of course.

Venner—Wilson.

I stopped short. Geoff glanced at me and said gravely : " Are you ill, Uncle ? "

He slipped a supporting arm under mine. I spoke aloud the two names, so terribly joined together.

" Venner—Wilson."

" What can you mean ? "

" Those names together mean nothing to you ? "

" Nothing. Why should they ? "

" Why, indeed ? You were sucking pear drops, and at a preparatory school at the time. But I read the case, as all the world did, with breathless interest."

" What case ? "

" A certain Dr. Wilson was tried for the murder of his wife. He had married a rich widow, a Mrs. Venner. Some Venner, or other, persuaded the authorities to have the body exhumed. I can't recall details. Wilson was accused of poisoning his wife. The circumstantial evidence against him was very strong. Some brilliant fellow defended him. Wilson was acquitted."

Naturally enough, the boy did not grasp at first the significance of what I told him. I said nothing. Illumination came to him quickly enough.

" Uncle Jim——! Oh, my God——! "

" Yes, Geoff, we have stumbled upon this blindly but we have been led, led step by step, to the truth. It is, I fear, humanly certain that Mr. Allen is Dr. Wilson."

Mr. Allen *Chapter V*

I

I WAS the first, I remember, to break the silence. It seems that I exclaimed, naturally enough :

" Poor Allen ! "

To my surprise Geoff said quickly :

" Now I am quite sure."

" Of what ? " I asked.

" That you don't love Ursula, as, as I do, or your first thoughts would have flown to her."

There was no denying this.

Sometimes, in waking out of a dream, I have found myself thinking in a puzzled sort of way of two persons who presently merge themselves into one person. As I stood staring at Geoff this curious merging process of Wilson and Allen took place. It seemed incredible. But it was true. Allen was Wilson, of Venner Hall, who had narrowly escaped the hangman's rope !

And I had been living on terms of friendship with him—I and mine—and nothing had warned me.

Ursula's slender figure seemed to float out of the darkness that hid from us Old Hall. I saw her, as it were, flitting towards me, dressed in white. That dear child, so innocent, so happy. I could hear her joyous laugh at some silly joke of mine. Again the sense of sheer incredulity seized me, mixed with acute pain now. My first thoughts had been pitching here and there, concerned with Allen's double personality, and these thoughts could settle upon no fixed point from which I could view all that flooded my bewildered brain. I am sure that when I considered her, the tender creature, I began to co-ordinate the facts with the strong desire to re-establish Allen in my mind as the man I had taken him to be.

My memory of the trial was not clear. There had been two trials, but with the ultimate acquittal of the defendant interest in both had languished.

I clung to the great fact of the acquittal. In the eyes of the Law, Allen is innocent, as innocent of serious crime as I am myself. Then why was it that the discovery of his identity had so overwhelmed me?

It is to Geoff's credit that he endeavoured to persuade me that I was mistaken. He is perhaps too fond, like many clever young men, of an argument for argument's sake, but it pleased me that he should think well of Allen. Nevertheless, the Venner miniature that had belonged to Ursula's unhappy mother, the significant fact that Allen must have bought Old Hall within a year after the trial, Ursula's ignorance of all family history, Allen's one slip, his admission to the girl that her mother was buried in Yorkshire, his flight into the wilderness, his hermit existence when he returned to England—could these be explained away as mere coincidence?

All this and more I talked over with Geoffrey after Agatha had gone to bed. Finally, he admitted that I must be right. Allen was Wilson. I could re-read both trials at my club, or where old files of *The Times* were kept.

Geoffrey offered to do this for me, but it had been settled, only that afternoon, that I was to go to London on the morrow. I had told Agatha that my hair was getting longer than I liked and that I needed a new tooth-brush. Also, I had decided to buy a new car.

II

In small matters of detail I may rely principally upon others; in the larger transactions of life I exercise promptitude and grasp. I had told Agatha that I meant to buy a new car, and it slightly annoyed me that she displayed surprise when I informed her, at breakfast, that I was going to London at once to do so.

"Ought you to buy it?"

"The money," I said mildly, "has been set aside for that purpose, out of income, as you know."

"Yes, I know. I merely meant, Jim, if I may say so without offence, that tradesmen, somehow, always impose upon you."

I felt huffed but I hope I didn't show it before the children. Accordingly, I replied with finality:

"When it comes to buying a car, I deal only with first-class people. Would it pay them to impose upon me? Certainly not. I shall buy the car I have in mind to-day."

Agatha, for once, held her tongue.

At Yeldham Station, after I had got my ticket, I saw Allen close to the book-stall, and in London kit. He carried a small bag, enough to hold papers. It was rather a shock, seeing him. He greeted me pleasantly and proposed travelling up together. I had a third-class ticket, but, when the train rolled up, I followed him into a first-class smoker. We had it to ourselves. He offered me a cigar, which I accepted. As a rule I never smoke cigars before luncheon, but my nerves were slightly on edge.

Here I was, alone with a man who had been tried for the murder of his wife!

Obviously, he wished to talk, and for some five minutes we chatted amicably enough. Then, abruptly, looking me straight in the face, he said in his husky voice:

"I'm ever so much better, Pollen."

He looked less cadaverous, so I ventured to congratulate him.

"Yes; I shall be myself again in a few weeks. I tackled the 'bug' too late. It can be wiped out easily enough when first symptoms show themselves. But you are not interested in that."

I assured him that I was.

"There is, of course, grave danger of recurrence when I go back. But I must go back. I'm biting my nails with impatience. And I'm planning a bigger expedition, for which I must provide the sinews of war."

I said nothing to deter him from this insane enterprise. It might cut the knot. If he went back, if he never returned to England, the truth might be kept from Ursula. My thoughts hovered about her, left alone in that big house, and possibly—who can say?—he read my thoughts. Without warning, he startled me by remarking:

"It would be a burden off my mind, if Ursula married."

Not a trace of tenderness softened his voice.

Did he know that Geoffrey had proposed marriage and been refused? He continued:

"I should like her to marry a man much older than herself. Young men don't appeal to her. She would be quite happy with some good kind fellow who understood her."

Did I blush ? Was he offering Ursula to me ? Ought I to tell him about Geoff ? Never have I felt more embarrassed. Hurriedly I suggested that we should lunch together at my club. Politely he refused. His next words left no doubt in my mind in regard to his objectives.

"I have always hoped, Pollen, that Ursula would marry a man of independent means, because what money I have may be spent before I die."

His strange eyes lingered upon mine.

As I remained silent, he picked up his newspaper and seemed to give his undivided attention to that. I picked up mine.

III

We parted at Liverpool Street. I went straight to the place where I bought my old car, years ago, and within ten minutes was the possessor of a new one. It was as simple as that. I said that I wanted the best five-seater they could supply at such and such a price. Within half an hour they were showing me how to drive it along the Embankment. It is a beautiful car. It cost rather more than I was prepared to pay, but they assured me that one at my price would not give me the highest and most lasting satisfaction, and, after all, it is their business to know these things. They congratulated me on securing an exceptional bargain owing to some unusual juncture of circumstances—I forget what—and they couldn't promise to repeat their offer, so I snapped it up. Promptitude! I now have an article which will serve me for a lifetime, and I congratulated myself upon a gilt-edged investment.

Then I had my hair cut and bought a toothbrush.

I lunched at the Buskin. It was a proud day when I was elected to this famous club, and, when I served on the committee, I found myself on intimate terms with many legal luminaries. Amongst them, Hemingway, K.C.

And Hemingway, by Jove! happened to be the first man to greet me as I was hanging my hat upon a peg in the corridor.

We lunched together.

Was this coincidence? I cannot think so. Hemingway, as I knew, belonged to the Criminologists. The Criminologists dine together now and again, and discuss, after dinner, famous trials. When I saw Hemingway, I knew instantly that he could tell me all that could be told about the Venner-Wilson trial.

He did.

I introduced the subject lightly, and he rose at it like a trout at a May fly.

"You are interested? Why?"

Fortunately, I was prepared for this "why."

"Well, I came upon a miniature the other day, a certain Ursula Venner, painted by Ozias Humphrey. The name Venner brought to mind—Wilson."

Hemingway glanced round the big room, almost empty; we were sipping our coffee and old brandy.

He plunged into both trials. Afterwards, when I read them through from beginning to end, not missing a line, I realised what a trained memory he had for detail. Indeed, I gleaned from him, and his masterly presentation of the evidence on both sides, all the essential facts. I will attempt to set them down in tabloid form.

Venner Hall was in a village on the outskirts of Barfield. It had been inherited by Mrs. Wilson's father, a fox-hunting squire, who had left it to her with a handsome fortune besides. She had married a cousin, also a Venner. Dr. Wilson, it seemed, was regarded as a rising man in his profession. He held Paris and Edinburgh degrees and appears to have been a man of singular personal fascination. Hemingway laid great emphasis on this. Wilson had met the Venners in London and returned with them to Venner Hall. Mrs. Venner—so it transpired at the first trial—had lent Wilson money wherewith to prosecute his research work. (When Hemingway spoke of his research work, the last hope that Allen was not Wilson went by the board.) Then Venner died. Within a year Dr. Wilson married Mrs. Venner. Within one more year Mrs. Wilson died, leaving all, or most, of her property unconditionally to her husband. Another cousin, also a Venner, who always had been hostile to Wilson, contested the will, which he accused Wilson of forging. At this point Hemingway mentioned Ursula, but not by name. The will had been contested, inasmuch as the Venner cousin, from his intimate knowledge of Mrs. Wilson, was absolutely certain that Mrs. Wilson intended to leave Venner Hall and the bulk of her estate to her child. Instead of doing this, she had left at least three-quarters of her estate to Wilson and the rest to the child, appointing Wilson sole executor and guardian of the infant. Hemingway couldn't remember whether the child was a boy or a girl.

The first trial attracted notice. There was not enough evidence to support the charge of forgery, and yet many persons believed that Wilson had done what he was accused of doing. All this would have been forgotten but for what followed some three months later. Wilson was arrested for the murder of his wife.

This second trial challenged tremendous interest, and again it seemed as if a guilty man had escaped punishment. The body had been exhumed and traces of poison found in it by the greatest experts of the day. Wilson had bought poison and had given his wife her medicine for some weeks previous to her death, except for the interval of one week, when he had been called away from home. During that week Mrs. Wilson's condition improved noticeably. The local doctor, an old man, who was called in at the last by Wilson, was shown at the trial to be something of a dodderer and past his work. All the symptoms pointed to arsenical poisoning and he had not suspected it. The old man suffered cruelly under cross-examination, and died soon afterwards.

A painful feature of the trial centred upon the proof of Wilson's ill-treatment of his wife. She had Graves's disease, that form of goitre in which the eyeballs protrude and the whole appearance of the patient is altered. Any attachment Wilson may have felt for his wife had disappeared, and servants testified that he had taunted her about her disfigurement in a cold-blooded fashion, indicating that he had conceived something like hatred for her. More, he had wished to leave her to prosecute his research work in some tropical country, and she had vehemently opposed this. However, his attitude towards his wife seemed to have changed when she became mortally ill, and he had shown her attention. But that was when he was administering his own medicines, which, according to the prosecution, accounted for his more humane behaviour.

Arsenic was found in small quantities in the medicine cupboard in the dead woman's bedroom. That saved Wilson, for it provided the defence with a plausible theory. Indeed, the acquittal had been a triumph for the prisoner's counsel, Murray Bate. The case for the Crown had been badly presented and broke down here and there. It was hampered by the fact that the will under which Wilson had benefited had been pronounced valid by the Courts, and certain evidence that would have told against the prisoner had been ruled out. Unfortunately, too, the vindictiveness of the Venner cousin defeated its own ends. It was easy enough to make him contradict himself under cross-examination, and to exhibit his overmastering detestation of the defendant as monomania. The only reason for it, cleverly suggested but never pushed, was that he might have benefited under the will which he declared his cousin intended to make. This had come out in the probate case, and had aroused sympathy for Wilson ; Wilson's conduct was successful in reviving that sympathy.

The judge summed up against the prisoner. When he came to the theory of the defence, that the unhappy wife, sick of life, had taken the poison herself, he instructed the jury that if they believed that her husband had so wrought upon her that she had been driven to make an end of herself, and that she had done so, that did not make him guilty of murder, even though they might hold him morally responsible for her death. Upon this the jury had returned a verdict of Not Guilty.

I give the story in main outline, as it was known to thousands at the time, but interest had been speedily lost when Wilson was set free and disappeared.

Hearing the story again from Hemingway's lips, I was struck by one weak link in the chain of circumstantial evidence. From my knowledge of Allen, as Allen, it was almost incredible that he, with all his knowledge of poisons, should have used arsenic. However, according to Hemingway, an impartial witness, Wilson had either murdered his wife or she had killed herself, goaded to do it by him. In either case, he passed off the scene *branded*, a fellow outside the pale of decent human intercourse. I asked my friend one more question :

"Did anybody suggest that Wilson murdered Venner first?"

"Of course they did."

He was almost laughing as he answered me, and his light tone provoked me. But how could he know that Allen was my landlord and neighbour? I said tartly:

"I suppose nothing surprises you."

He replied genially, in tones mellowed by our club Madeira:

"My dear old Pollen, I have practised for many years at the Criminal Bar; I have known intimately many famous and infamous criminals. Personally, I regard them as insane. There is a kink. Often that kink leads to their conviction. With murderers it is only the first murder that troubles them. You will recall the 'Brides in the Bath' case. By-bye; you are the last man in the world whom I should have suspected of being interested in crime."

IV

I couldn't return to Mote Farm that day; I couldn't face the possibility of travelling back with Allen. I wired to Agatha that I was unexpectedly detained in London, and then retired to our Silence room, where I jotted down what Hemingway had told me.

The first shock of revelation spent itself, but the matter of identity, although nearly proven up to the hilt, bewildered me.

There has always been something about Allen that I haven't understood, a feeling of distrust more negative than positive. I have been ready to like him, but I knew, as I sat brooding by myself, that I had never liked him. I just took him for granted. The quality in him which baffled me, but even here not to the point of making me question myself about it, is that he presented himself to me as detached from everything except the future—*his* future.

I left the Buskin, and wandered into Leicester Square, where I sat down. A breeze blew up from the river; the familiar noises of the traffic fell comfortingly upon my ears. I have found solace in this bright, everyday world, in which men went about their business or pleasure, making continual contact with their fellows, secure in themselves and in those contacts. I belong to the common herd. Now—the relation in which I stood towards these hurrying foot-passengers had altered. These ordinary people, bent upon their ordinary pursuits, whom I should have watched yesterday with idle, fugitive interest, were touched by a sinister wand, which turned them into creatures of doubt. I decided that this was a nightmare to be shaken from me.

Once again, the thought of Ursula cleared my mind, even while it immeasurably saddened it. The shadows in which, all unknowing, she was living had not touched her. They must be kept away from her. That was the one thing that really mattered. If only our little innocent plans had not gone agley——

It is difficult to affirm with any positiveness that at this moment I conceived the idea of sheltering Ursula from the risk of premature discovery by marrying her myself. I had led too easy a life, too remote from the dreadful sorrows of others. I was not fit to deal with a dark and difficult affair like this, although I determined to do my best not to fail where I saw my duty. I could not see it plainly. Everything appeared to be blurred—except Ursula. She shone out of the murk. I could see, plainly enough, Geoffrey standing by her with a big protecting arm about her. But—if she didn't want him—— ?

Yes; I suppose that I did get a glimpse of myself as Ursula's husband. But it was only a glimpse, and it left me uncomfortably hot and ridiculously shy. Still—if I could make her happy—— ?

I dined alone at the Buskin, and after dinner, in the library, I read the two trials.

Does a man become hardened to cumulative shocks ?

At the time of the first trial, Ursula was mentioned by name as the only child of the first marriage. Her right name was Ursula Venner. I had hoped that it would be so, and it was so—unquestionably. The last lingering doubt vanished. Metaphorically I girded up my loins—to little definite purpose, I fear. Ursula had none of Wilson's blood in her veins. That rejoiced me. The Venners, from what I could learn, were good stock. I hesitate to indict myself as a shirker, but I think I should have bolted from Mote Farm like a frightened rabbit had I discovered that Ursula was half Wilson. Mind you, I had just read all the evidence that convicted the man as a heartless, selfish blackguard. I passed a wretched night, and returned to Yeldham early next morning.

V

The children were very disappointed because I left the new car in London with instructions that it should be driven down to Mote Farm when I sent for it. Really, I was too "rattled" to drive it down myself and by myself.

Geoff met me with the old bus at the station, and listened to my jeremiad. Jeremiad it was. Do what I could to face things with fortitude and resignation, I was sensible of my limitations.

Geoff asked me if I had been to Somerset House to see Mrs. Wilson's will. I suppose I ought to have gone that morning. Geoff has a touch of Agatha in his make-up. Occasionally the dear fellow is impatient with me. He said curtly:

"We must accept the verdict of the jury."

"Yes, yes; and, meanwhile, a word from me to Ursula might or might not do good."

"Might—or might not?"

I explained. Coming down in the train, my mind had dwelt persistently upon the problem of keeping Allen's awful secret from the child. She might stumble upon the truth at any moment, knowing, as she did, that the lady of the miniature was a Venner. How fortunate that she had hesitated to ask Allen.

Finally, Geoff and I agreed that I might venture to warn Ursula against trying to articulate the skeleton in the family cupboard. She must have guessed that there was a skeleton. If I confirmed this, could she resist the ravages of an aroused curiosity?

The children were at the gate to welcome me. Somehow, the sight of them, and a comparison between them and the motherless Ursula, made me very unhappy. Agatha's lively suspicions were provoked by my lack of appetite at luncheon.

"Has anything gone wrong?" she asked.

"I think," said I, "that I'm suffering from a suppressed chill; but don't fuss, my dear, I may be mistaken."

It will be seen that I can, under pressure, pull myself out of a hole. Agatha was entirely satisfied. Presently Jemima said pointedly:

"Darling Ursula is coming here to play tennis this afternoon. We told her that you would be back."

I accepted this as a providential intimation that I must grasp my opportunity.

I

WHEN I did get her alone, not without skilful manœuvring, Ursula betrayed no embarrassment. In this, of course, she is of her generation, not mine. And I have never detected any signs of sloppy sentimentality—probably pinched out of her when she was at school.

" I wanted to speak to you," said I presently, " upon a matter that concerns your happiness."

I ought to have worded this opening differently. Instantly her manner changed, and she turned her clear eyes from mine.

" Yes," she murmured softly.

" It is about that miniature."

" Oh ! "

The exclamation disconcerted me. At the same time it was fairly obvious that she had not grasped any connection between the miniature and her happiness. Putting it plainly, she must have left the skeleton in its closet.

" I am sure," I continued, " that I found out something which Mr. Allen did not wish you to know."

" I think so too," she said calmly. " I have put the miniature away till—till my father, of his own free will, confides in me."

"Fine!" I exclaimed with enthusiasm. "You are all I took you to be—and more. I won't say another word."

She accepted this as final. With a certain hesitation, she asked me a question:

"Do you know, can you guess, what I thought you were going to say to me when you spoke of my happiness?"

"Tell me," said I cleverly.

"I thought, I was a wee bit afraid, that you were going to—to talk about Geoffrey. You have all been wonderful over that. I thought that things would be so awkward, almost impossible. I suppose the children coaxed me back. And you received me as if nothing had happened to—to disappoint you and vex you."

"He rushed his fences," I murmured.

"Oh, no; and ever since I have wondered whether I—I encouraged him. I didn't mean to. We were so jolly together, so friendly. I thought of him, and got really fond of him, because he was your nephew and the children's brother. And so, it upset me dreadfully when he asked for something I couldn't give him."

Her voice quivered into silence. The candid sweetness of her little hesitations enchanted a too crusty old bachelor; but I dared not kiss her, as I was sorely tempted to do. Instead, I blurted out foolishly:

"Master Geoff may not have taken your 'no' too seriously."

"You don't mean——"

"I mean, you nice, plucky child, that we are all going on as before. Holy matrimony can be the most unholy state in the world, if it is entered into too hastily."

She regarded me mischievously.

"That sounds rather like Mrs. Willing, or is it Tupper?"

Well, well, moral aphorisms are not in my line. I always feel a humbug when they escape from me. And now, I suppose, I was regarding Ursula as a Venner. We Pollens, having made our money in trade, have acquired with it a slight taint of snobbishness. I do look upon a county magnate, the representative of a fine old family, with something approximating to reverence. He stands for so much that I value in English life. Ursula had distinction. I found it because I expected it and looked for it.

"Did you have a good time in London?" she asked.

I lied superbly.

"Father went to London yesterday, but he didn't take me."

"London at the beginning of August——"

"I know; but I should like a good time in London, some day."

Instantly I decided that the day must be soon. I spoke of the new car, the five-seater. We might run up, have a picnic *en route*, and do a play.

Ursula dimpled, just as Jemima does when she is tickled pink (her expression).

"You know, Uncle Jim, I have never been to

Madame Tussaud's. I'm sure that I should be thrilled by the Chamber of Horrors."

That tore it for me. By the grace of God, and thanks to an inefficient counsel for the prosecution, Wilson was not where Ursula might have found him. The children rushed up, and covered my slight confusion.

II

That night, when we were alone, Geoffrey submitted to me a startling suggestion. Remember that he had not yet read the newspaper reports of the trials, and I had been careful, when I repeated what Hemingway had said about them, not to prejudice his judgment. And yet he had felt exactly as I did about the case as a whole. In fine, he regarded Allen, or Wilson, as a cold-blooded fiend. I may be putting this too strongly, but I shall let these words stand.

He suggested that we should tell Allen—I must still call him by his assumed name—that we knew the truth, and accelerate his departure from Yeldham. Ursula, as he pointed out, could return to the Berridges. After an instant's hesitation I said decidedly :

" Allen will do what he pleases, when he pleases. He would resent savagely anything like pressure."

I'm sure now that I was right in this, and Geoffrey nodded gloomily. For my part I felt less unhappy. Ursula's courage and common sense fortified me. The real danger of swift enlightenment had been side-tracked. I made due allowance for the boy's eagerness to "do something." Inaction palsied him. Then he declared his intention of going to Somerset House to see Mrs. Wilson's will.

"But we know all that is worth knowing."

"Perhaps we don't."

I didn't attempt to dissuade him. He is an excellent, level-headed driver of any car. He might bring down mine. A few excursions to points of interest would distract our minds. Agatha would accept that as an adequate reason for his spending a day away from us.

I slept soundly that night and awoke less pessimistic. Ursula had promised to resume the mashie practice in our meadow. Shaving at my open window, in full view of our glorious herbaceous border, my sense triumphed over my sensibilities. Allen would go back to the upper waters of the Amazon, and, bearing in mind his physical condition, we should not be troubled with him again. In due time Ursula would marry Geoff. A maid's "no," nine times out of ten, means "perhaps."

A tap at the door put to flight these speculations. Jemima and Matilda entered, and embraced me passionately on my still lathered cheeks. The night before I had taken a peep at the sleeping innocents, and, as the room was dark, I managed to do a little conjuring trick with some coins and their pillows, unobserved by Agatha, who was with me at the time and had Fairchild Family ideas upon the subject of pocket-money. Sixpence a week is her maximum.

"Uncle Jim, we found two half-crowns under our pillows this morning. Mummy couldn't have put them there. 'Course, it was you."

I owned up and pledged them to secrecy.

"I put them there, my chicks, because we are going to town on a jaunt soon; and what, I ask you, is our metropolis without money to spend?"

"Is Ursula going too?"

"I'm credibly informed that she is."

They kissed me again. Jemima whispered, overheard, of course, by Matilda:

"We have decided that we shan't call her '*Aunt* Ursula,' and—and shall we be bridesmaids?"

I dismissed them summarily.

As I selected a smart tie, my thoughts returned, like cooing doves, to Ursula and Geoff, a very notable pair. Geoff has a lot of Pollen in him—Matilda and Jemima are all Pollen—but there is a trace of Willing, who always chose to treat me as if I had no brains at all; a superior person; I never cottoned to him. Occasionally poor Geoff harks back to the Willing strain and develops a sort of jealousy of other people who are as clever as he is. But I ought not to be thinking of the boy harshly. He has had a bad knock and taken it extraordinarily well. He appears to be quite ready to sacrifice himself for Ursula's sake.

And so am I, confound it!

III

It is impossible to play golf unless you give undivided attention to every shot. And I defy any man under ninety to keep an eye on the ball when Ursula presents prior claims to both eyes. She looked more than usually alluring that lovely morning, in perfect tune with the landscape. The long border was a riot of colour ; the grass of the bowling green had an indescribable bloom or sheen upon it ; the water-lilies, white, yellow, and pink, floated upon the moat, guarded, as sentinels, by the tall flag-irises ; honeysuckle and roses trailed along the balustrade of the bridge, scenting all the air ; great masses of snowy cloud moved majestically across the brilliant blue of the summer sky.

As Matilda and Jemima invariably consult me about the colour of their frocks, I may claim to possess specialised knowledge upon this important subject. Agatha denies this, or rather she asserts, in the superior Willing way, that men only know what pleases them. Well, I have sustained faith in my conviction that what pleases the ordinary man in the street—a fair enough description of myself—will please most men. Agatha contends that women prink not to please women—oh, dear, no!—but to provoke envy in them. A hateful idea, if you come to think of it, and unworthy of a super-woman, such as she is.

Still, I hesitate to describe Ursula's frock on this particular morning—and there wasn't much of it to describe. Diaphanous amber suggested imprisoned sunbeams. Indeed, I beheld the garment—a sort of *chiton*—as an *aura*. It revealed modestly her grace of limb and the nymph-like curves of her dear body. I thought immediately of rosy-fingered Dawn. There are moments when it occurs to me that verse, not prose, is my true medium. I have a certain knack at limericks.

But I am wandering again.

As Ursula flitted towards me—punctual to the minute, bless her!—I reflected sorrowfully what an Eden this place would be if the snake of human obliquity had not reared its ugly venomous head in it—— And—another sad reflection—was Geoffrey aware of the great boon of his youth, for which such rare prizes as Ursula are reserved? I put myself out of court. I had listened, old fool that I am, to the prattle of Jemima; I had accepted, with a senile thrill, Geoffrey's assurance that I was the "other fellow." Now—I refused to believe in the other fellow. Ursula, of course, was fancy free. Youth is too arrogant. There is no doubt about Geoff's qualities of head, but qualities of heart are a better guide to the innermost courts of love. If there had been more Pollen in the boy, if he had allowed a longer time to absorb and appreciate Ursula's innocence and sweetness, he would have run less risk of rejection. He would win her yet, if he walked with her more delicately. I saw her that morning as the eternal SHE exalted into a vision of virginity transcending any that had come to me before. I saw the lovely qualities of womanhood lying folded in her, trembling towards some ultimate expression, which a word or a look from the right man might call forth. There was no defence to them except in her innocence and trustfulness. A rude touch might blight them in the very act of budding. But they would light a flame of devotion in the soul of a true lover who would rise to his full stature in cherishing and defending them. It is not given to many men to find love in this divinely appointed way. I had missed it in the days when I might have been made by it. Alas! it was too late for me to walk in those paradisal alleys, but at least I might do something to protect them for those who could.

IV

We lost our tempers in the first half-hour's practice—and regained them swiftly. *That* is the vital thing. I have no patience with graven images. Your plus-four fellow, blessed (or cursed) with what the professors term "the golfing temperament," is a mere machine, an automaton. Ursula, palpitating flesh and blood, regained her temper before I did.

"Aren't we uncomfortably warm?" she asked.

It was very warm, too hot a day for any strenuous exercise.

"Let us cool off," I suggested.

"Let's."

Ten minutes later we were in the punt under some willows. I found in the pocket of my coat come acidulated drops which I had bought for the children. To slake our thirsts we sucked these in soothing silence. I had no irresistible wish to talk to Ursula. It sufficed me to look at her as she smiled up at me from the bottom of the punt where she lay curled up on our red, white and blue cushions. I sat at the other end, sensible that nearly thirty years were an Atlantic between us.

"Where is Geoffrey, Uncle Jim?"

"He has gone to London to drive down my car."

"How wildly exciting!"

I told her about the car, perhaps at too great length, for she closed her eyes, and presently I discovered that she was asleep. She slept as Jemima sleeps, with her head pillowed upon a rounded arm, with lips barely parted. Had she finished sucking her drop? If not, would it slide down her throat and choke her? This possibility distressed me. I had been solemnly enjoined by Agatha never to give the children sweets when they were in bed.

She sighed deliciously, and opened her eyes.

"Heavens! I've been asleep."

She sat up, blushing, wide-awake and repentant.

"Yes."

"And you were telling me about your new car. I remember your last words: 'It had balloon tyres and four-wheel brakes.'"

"Yes; that was the very last thing I said."

May the Recording Angel wipe out the fib. It was the first thing I had said. Anyway, the happy lie reassured a happy girl; so all was well.

"I—I didn't snore, did I?"

"You couldn't."

"Or talk in my sleep?"

"No; you slumbered as blissfully as the Sleeping Beauty in the fairy tale."

"What must you have thought?"

"Well, I thought of the fairy prince and his privileges."

She was pleased with this flight of fancy. Then she said seriously:

"Uncle Jim, why don't you buy Mote Farm?"

"There are many reasons, child. One will do. It's not for sale."

"But it is."

"What?"

"Father means to sell the Yeldham property. He told me so yesterday."

I gulped down this bit of information. It fitted into the puzzle. Allen had to raise money, a lot of money.

"You are astonished, Uncle Jim. I wasn't. What is the use of a place if you don't live in it? I believe father hates Old Hall because he made certain that he was going to die in it."

Shrewdly put! I nodded.

"You might buy Mote Farm. Father means to go back to those awful swamps. I suppose I shall go back to the Vicarage."

I beheld the Vicarage as an awful swamp for Ursula.

"It wouldn't be so bad if you bought Mote Farm Perhaps you couldn't afford to buy it?"

This is exactly how Jemima and Matilda "worm" out of me matters that don't concern them. Even to Agatha I have a dislike of talking about money affairs.

"That's as may be," I replied.

"I'm so sorry; I—I oughtn't to have asked such a question."

This disarmed me.

"I *could* afford to buy Mote Farm," said I cautiously, "at a reasonable price."

"When father wants to sell, he just sells."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me so only last night. He has bought and sold other properties. And I dare say at a loss, too."

She was showing me a new facet. Yorkshire tykes are alert little beasties. To draw her out I said, as I do to Jemima:

"Tch! Tch! How dare you say that?"

"From my knowledge of his character. He is so impatient of delay. Money means nothing to him. He has spent thousands and thousands on his expeditions. Just between you and me, I expect you could get Mote Farm cheap."

She spoke coaxingly, the little witch, using her shrewd north-country brains. It's an extraordinary thing, but I have the reputation at the Buskin of being a reserved fellow, on the secretive side. Really, I am shy of cackling about my private affairs to grown-ups. But with children I uncork myself. I can talk to Jemima and Matilda about the insignificant sums that I wager on likely winners or about my new summer suit. Oddly enough, they are interested, and perhaps my ingrained irresolutions sharpen their budding wits. It may be so. Anyway, temptation assailed me to unbosom myself to Ursula. Why not? All my life I have been tempted to buy a small property—three acres or so, without a cow. Cows mean calves. Calves disturb early matutinal dozing. But, of late years, I have put this temptation from me, simply because Geoff is a town bird, a typical London sparrow. If I size him up right, he will work at his chosen profession till he drops—and in London. To buy a small property, to improve it, to make an enchanting garden (all this is dear to me), to leave it to Geoff who would promptly sell it, disgruntles me. Again, if I bought such a property from selfish motives, I should hoist myself with my own petard. I should never leave the tiny paradise I have in mind; I should shut myself off from Agatha and the children, and many stout friends; I should become a hermit.

All this I poured into Ursula's ears—*and she did not doze off*.

Agatha says that women adore personalities, but she means by that talk that concerns herself. Obviously, Ursula can be intensely interested in what concerns others. Upon this occasion I discovered in her tenacity of purpose. She nailed her flag to the mast of my little sailing boat; she put to sea with me; she boxed my compass.

"You ought to consider yourself more than you do, Uncle Jim. I can't see you as a hermit. The real crab to your buying Mote Farm would be this: your spare rooms would never be empty; and Yeldham is so near London. Matilda and Jemima are mad keen on your buying it."

Evidently these three kids had talked over the possibility, before Ursula even knew that the place might be in the market.

I had to cut her short.

"Can you stay to luncheon, child?"

She could; and she did.

V

Long before Geoff rolled up the drive in the new car, I had come to the conclusion that Providence, acting inscrutably as usual, was not hating me as I had been reluctantly constrained to believe the day before. Or—to put it more reverently—He was tempering the wind which I had regarded as a howling gale. Allen was pulling up stakes at the right moment. He would leave Ursula at the Vicarage within reach of friends. And—this touched the high note—*she was not his daughter.* When she learned that, Allen would assume other proportions in her mind. Still, the horrors of the Wilson-Venner trials must be kept from her as long as possible.

We received Geoff right royally. The children and I spread some turkey twill upon the front door steps, flanked by pots of flowers. Jemima, as the car drew up, rang a large bell; Matilda almost shattered the gong. A small family demonstration, not worth recording save for this significant fact: Geoffrey looked glum. As Ursula had gone home, this didn't matter, but it oppressed me with a sense of foreboding which I linked up, intuitively, with Somerset House. He arrived just before dinner, and I hadn't a chance to have a word with him alone. It occurred to me that we had, perhaps, done the right thing at the wrong time.

I was not mistaken. The gale that had blown me almost out of my boots, the gale that had diminished to a bracing breeze, began to rage again with increased fury.

Geoff's first words prepared me for another shock:

"We're up against it, Uncle Jim. I'm half crazy with anxiety."

I transcribe from my diary the sum and substance of what aroused his apprehension. He had read Mrs. Wilson's will. The newspaper reports were correct, so far as they went. I can only suppose that the will was not submitted as a whole to the public, inasmuch as the point at issue was not what the exact provisions were, but whether or not the instrument had been forged. Geoff had noted down the provisions. Fifteen thousand pounds were left specifically to Ursula, to be paid to her on the day of her marriage (if she married with Wilson's consent) or when she became of age. In the event of her death, this money would be Wilson's. Everything else, as the newspapers recorded, had been left unconditionally to Wilson, and he had been appointed sole executor and guardian to Ursula. Under the terms of the will, he could, of course, invest Ursula's money in any gilt-edged security.

I admit that my wits can't race to conclusions as Geoff's do. For the moment I was not conscious of apprehension. Rather the contrary. Ursula was independent of her stepfather; a modest fortune was assured her; it was comforting to reflect that she would not go to Geoff—if she married him—empty-handed.

To my dismay, Geoffrey, in the precise, cut-and-dried Willing way, made me realise that I was wallowing in a fool's paradise.

He said sharply: "You told me, last night, that this devil was raising money to defray the enormous expense of a big expedition. From what we know of him he is a monomaniac, whether he murdered his wife or not. Personally, I agree with you that such a man would not use arsenic as a poison. He would have selected one of the almost untraceable vegetable alkaloids. But he killed Ursula's mother, just the same. We are dealing with a criminal. Again, whether or not he forged the will is of little importance. *His* will is the salient feature. Probably he imposed his will on a woman frightened out of her life of him. You will tell me that he escaped penal servitude and then the gallows by the skin of his teeth. You would cite this as a deterrent. If you do, your psychology is all wrong. He risked the gallows after he had escaped Portland or Dartmoor. Nothing deters such men from fresh crimes. The saving clause, so far as society is concerned, is that they become too bold, too reckless. I have no hesitation in saying that if this wretch needs money he will help himself to

Ursula's fortune, and—this is the final turn of the screw—he has covered his tracks so cleverly that nobody, except our two selves, knows that she has fifteen thousand pounds or pence. Have you got it ? "

Yes ; I had it right enough, and felt strangled.

We talked on, I remember, wandering in a vicious circle, returning always to Wilson. I had to admit that such a man would stick at nothing.

" Ursula *is* nothing to him," said Geoff. " She never has been anything, a fly to be brushed from his hand."

I then told him about my talk that morning with the child, and her stepfather's determination to sell his Yeldham property. That further darkened our horizon.

" I lay a thousand to three," said Geoff, " that Ursula's money has been spent already. Probably the Yeldham property is plastered. He has hung on to Old Hall because it turned out such a sanctuary for him. Only an astoundingly clever scoundrel would have thought of buying such a place."

" It beats me why he did it, Geoff."

" Does it ? I think I can explain. But we must go back, and try to stand in his shoes. He found himself after the second trial a free man, but, as Hemingway says, branded. He sold everything in Yorkshire, and vanished, taking the child, not yet three, with him. Probably he went abroad, where he grew his beard and formulated his plans. He had quarrelled with all the Venners, but he must have known that they, if they had any bowels of compassion, would make efforts to find the child. Probably they did—and failed. Ultimately, he discovers Yeldham, the 'Back of Beyond' to the people who knew him as Dr. Wilson. He assumes a name common enough without being too common. He buys a property, leaves the child with the parson, and vanishes on one of his expeditions. He comes back from it established as Allen, the explorer. His neighbours, mostly country bumpkins, leave him alone, because he wants to be left alone. And in fourteen years Wilson has been wiped off the face of the earth. I lift my hat to him as I do to the memory of Charles Peace, equally successful along similar lines."

"Why was he civil to us?"

Geoff laughed, the first laugh that had escaped his lips.

"Dear Uncle Jim, you're a knock-out."

Not illuminating to me.

"You see, he regarded us as——"

He paused, frowning. Up to this point the boy had impressed me. Everything he had said had been carefully thought out and licked into shape. I couldn't have stated the facts more tersely and lucidly myself. I began to wonder that he hadn't ditched the new car coming down.

"Carry on!"

"If he saw us as mugs——"

"*Mugs*——?" I repeated protestingly.

"You know what I mean. If he saw us as—as we are—fairly agreeable, drop-in-to-tea people, as remote from his ambitions as the fixed stars, it might occur to his active mind that we would take Ursula off his hands——"

"We?"

"Really, I mean you."

I retorted, I hope with some dignity:

"Now, look here, Geoff, we have been speaking as man to man, trying to get to the bottom of an abominable situation, but you must remember the difference in our ages. I might be—I wish I was—your father. You choose to think that Ursula would marry me; that is behind what you said just now."

"It is."

"I'm sure, absolutely sure, that you are mistaken."

"All right, uncle, I won't press any point that punctures your dear old skin. But I stick to this: Allen, or Wilson, damn him! picked you out as a potential husband for Ursula."

He paused again, and I said nothing, because I recalled Allen's words to me in the train, words I had not repeated to Geoff.

"You may be right in that," I muttered.

"You," continued Geoff, hammering in his tacks, "are a man of independent means and much younger than you look. You are the last man to ask bothering questions. You—had you loved Ursula and had she loved you—would have taken her as she stands."

"I suppose I should."

"My surmise is that Wilson has been looking out for just such a man as you are. And—please don't be offended—Ursula must have said something to him about you, which encouraged him in his designs on you. Hence the civility shown to you which he never showed to any of his neighbours."

I remained silent, once more a prey to most bitter-sweet misgivings.

We bade each other good night shortly afterwards, and I retired to my room to jot down, as nearly verbatim as possible, our long talk. I think I have preserved the marrow of it. As he shook my hand, Geoff said sharply:

"We must act—and promptly."

But I declined to discuss action at an hour when honest men are sound asleep.

Mr. Allen *Chapter VII*

I

It is my habit, when Deacon brings me my early morning tea, to dip into some book, preferably Montaigne. There is a ripe and rich philosophy about Montaigne which lingers upon the mental palate. He loved life; he made the most of it; he touched depths and heights, but always lightly. Long ago, I commended Montaigne to poor Willing. He regarded me sourly. But then he really preferred whisky-and-soda to Lafite and Latour. And he couldn't read French. Montaigne, in English, is a caged lark.

When Deacon pulls up the blinds, I ask him what of the day. He reckons himself to be a weather prophet, and taps the barometer at eight to the tick every morning. Having done so, he is not much wiser than the rest of us. Being stolidly English, he hedges. " A be-utiful morning, sir, but I fancy we shall have showers later on." Generally, he is right.

I did not ask him for a forecast, upon the morning following Geoff's visit to Somerset House. I didn't care tuppence what the weather was. My barometer stood at " Set Stormy." When I picked up Montaigne I couldn't stomach him. I was unutterably depressed, rather regretting that I had not died in my sleep.

Sleep——? I hadn't slept a wink. I mean I had woke up at least ten times ; my sheets were crumpled and half of the bedclothes on the carpet. Perfectly beastly !

Presently I slunk out of bed and crept unwillingly into my bath. Cold water invigorated me. Also, I could hear Jemima singing shrilly, which always provokes a rebuke from Agatha. I popped into the nursery to warn her, but she informed me that her mummy had gone to early church. I was confounded. I had quite forgotten that it was Sunday. I know that I'm ridiculously old-fashioned, but I don't read Montaigne on Sunday. Habit, just habit.

I arrayed myself in my blue serge suit, but I decided to give church a miss. Apart from the fact that Ursula, under normal conditions, would distract my attention from our magnificent liturgy, I couldn't bear the prospect of seeing her alone in that preposterous pew. I was sure that Geoff would feel just as I did.

I was right. Geoff appeared at the breakfast table in "plus fours," not looking his best, but with a set, aggressive jaw that took away what appetite I had. Willing had just the same jaw.

We took the air together, after the children had said their Collects. I have tried in vain to relieve the poor darlings of this holiday task, for so Agatha regards it, because our Collects, with sundry exceptions, are serious contributions to English Literature and should be treated reverentially. To hear Matilda rattling them off at the same pace she sets for *The Lays of Ancient Rome* dislocates my sense of the proprieties.

"What are we going to do?" demanded my nephew in uncompromising tones.

"It's Sunday," I said feebly. (I was feeling feeble.) Then I added more happily: "Are we going to poison an English Sunday by talking about this pestilent fellow?"

"We must," Geoff replied; and his jaw stuck out more than ever. I shrugged my shoulders.

"I know what you have in mind," I said. "You are the victim of auto-suggestion. You had the notion that we could go to Allen and use pressure. That notion has become a fixed determination. Well, I tell you that he would laugh at us and defy us. Ursula is not of age. He is her legal guardian. We could threaten him with exposure. But you said last night that Ursula was nothing to him. He is obsessed with his intention to equip another expedition. Ursula would learn the very thing we wish to keep from her, and Allen would vanish as before. As for her fortune, I doubt whether Ursula herself is legally entitled to demand an accounting till she is of age."

"As to that, uncle, we could take legal advice. If Ursula demanded an accounting, and he refused it, she could appeal to her Venner relations. They might make it uncomfortably hot for Allen."

"By that time he might be out of England."

"Yes; I had abandoned the idea of us two going to Old Hall to use pressure. I see another solution of the problem that might have occurred to you."

"To me?"

"Yes; you reminded me last night of the difference in our ages, but I should like to speak to you, if I may, as if we were of the same age and standing."

"Go ahead."

I shall try to set down exactly what he did say, but I cannot convey how he said it. I can only record that I was very deeply moved and touched by his great affection and solicitude for me. I had reckoned doctors, as a class, to be slightly lacking in sympathy, case-hardened by the sight of suffering from which men like myself are so mercifully spared. He began hesitatingly:

"You have been much more than a father to me, Uncle Jim. And that is why it is so difficult to speak to you on level terms. There is, there must be, a very poignant sense of obligation."

"Cut that out, my dear boy."

"If you were my greatest friend, which you are, and also of my age, and more or less like me, could you love Ursula?"

"Geoff——!"

"I mean, is she the sort of wife you might have loved devotedly if—if you were my age? For God's sake, answer me without reserves."

I had to answer him honestly:

"Yes."

"Uncle Jim, you don't know what it costs me to say this, but Ursula loves you. You don't believe it, but I know it. If I thought there was a dog's chance of winning her on my own, do you think I would tell you this? I'm a doctor; I know something about women. We hear queer confessions sometimes."

"She has confessed to you?" I gasped.

"Not much; but I know what has happened. You were dead right about one thing. With a young innocent girl, the first man to challenge her imagination has all the odds in his favour. She had never met a man like you. You have a way with you that captivates children; she is little more than a child; a child and yet a woman. For one thing, she understands you; you are crystal clear to her; I am not. Would that I were! All her life she has craved love that has been withheld. Only doctors and priests know what that craving is. It is the overmastering instinct of sex, even when it is unconscious of sex. Jemima and Matilda have it. They love you more than they love our mother. And you—you have inspired this; and you can give her happiness. There is an appalling lot of rot talked about women. They don't demand much in one sense, and in another they demand everything. They will face anything, if they secure fidelity and devotion. They do want to own, body and soul, one man. If Ursula marries you she will get that. If she married me, loving me, my profession might come between us. I don't know; it might. A man with ambitions always runs that risk. He can't give undivided attention to his wife. Women of the Ursula type, essentially feminine, want that. Few get it. I repeat, you can make Ursula happy; you can cherish her and comfort her when the truth comes out, horrible though it is. She will simply cast it aside, if you are with her."

I was speechless with the emotions which he had awakened, and perhaps my first dominating thought was pride in my nephew. The nobility of the man radiated from him. At his age, I couldn't have even expressed myself with his power and conviction; I couldn't have considered the case of the "other fellow" at all. I should have considered myself.

I felt strangely humbled, conscious of civil war raging between my higher and baser instincts.

If Ursula loved me——?

My dear boy—dearer to me at that moment than he had ever been before—respected my silence, whether or not he understood it.

If Ursula loved me?

II

So that was the way out of the wood, as Geoffrey saw it with a clearness of vision denied to me. Sometimes I think that I am short-sighted mentally; I blink at what is blurred. I play golf and tennis in specs, a disability when it rains, but where can we buy "clearers" of what is dim to the mind's eye?

Of course, being a bit of a funk, I temporised. After all, it was Sunday, the day set apart for rest. I said that I could tackle the insistent problem with a clearer head on Monday. At the last, Geoff was rather brutal with me.

"You don't believe that Ursula loves you. Why not ask her, and find out?"

I couldn't, at the moment, pledge myself to any definite course of action. I had heard of "retreats"—Berridge had spoken of them—where men of the world find sanctuary and time and silence wherein to reconsider valuations. I fear I had scoffed at these cold-harbours inwardly. Now, every instinct urged me to retreat into myself, to audit, so to speak, myself, to weigh my strength, such as it is, and my weakness, and to strike a true balance between them. It takes a bit of doing. Agatha asserts that I'm more of a dreamer than a doer. There is room in this world for both.

In the end we stepped out more briskly, and went for a longish walk, returning to Mote Farm just before luncheon. Little was said during that walk, and not another word about either Ursula or her stepfather. For the first time since I met her, I wanted to get away from the child, to think of her as a woman, as—I may as well set down the truth—as *the woman* willing to entrust her life and happiness to me.

Judge of my dismay when Agatha, more formidable in her Sunday clothes, met me on the bowling green and, supported by the grinning children, dropped this brick upon my toes:

" Mr. Allen is going to London to-morrow, for two days. I have persuaded Ursula to come to us whilst her father is away."

" She didn't need much persuading," added Jemima, nudging Matilda behind her mother's back.

Well, I died like a man. I think Geoffrey saw the signs of dissolution, for he managed, somehow, to entice the children away. I was left alone with my sister.

" You might have consulted me, my dear."

" What can you mean ? "

Really I was miserably aware that Geoff and I ought to have told Agatha everything, but how could we ? I fell back upon what I detest—half-truths. Give me a good satisfying lie every time.

" Is it quite in order to have her here after—er—what has happened ? "

"What nonsense! You, not I, live in the eighteenth century. Jemima, just now, told the truth. She needed no persuading. Really the little puss rather fished for the invitation; and, of course, we're delighted to have her. Believe me, women are far more sensible than men over these matters. Both Geoff and she have come together quite naturally. Geoff can begin again if he wants to. Next time, let us hope, he will make more sure of his ground before he advances to the attack."

I surrendered.

III

Ursula arrived, all smiles, next day. She talked and laughed, care free. One can only be thankful for the youth in her that won't accept trouble as its natural lot in life. As for retreating into myself, or anywhere else, her joyous presence made that impossible.

In the afternoon I took her and the children to the sea in the new car. Geoffrey said that he had important letters to write. Agatha was glad to be off duty as hostess of a young lady with whom she had little in common. I suggested that she should lie down for an hour or two. If she is so solicitous about my health, I mustn't be behindhand in caring for hers. She rejected the proposal, but my artless Mrs. Deacon told me when we came back that my sister had spent most of the afternoon in her bedroom. I don't suppose she stood up all the time.

We went to Allington, where there are sands and sand dunes. It was a hot afternoon, and I wasn't feeling energetic enough to join in the spade and bucket parade. Ursula danced off with Jemima and Matilda and left me reclining against a sand-bank. My cruel anxieties were temporarily in abeyance, and I fell into a light sleep, but was aware all the time, very drowsily, of the surge of the sea and the fresh salty air and the young voices not far from me.

I opened my eyes to find Ursula standing by me, looking at me with an expression upon her face that I had never seen before. It vanished swiftly. When she saw that I was awake she sat down on the sand. The children were just out of hearing, but probably wouldn't allow us to be alone for long. Ursula said roguishly:

"You didn't snore, or talk in your sleep, Uncle Jim."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I was looking at you for quite a long time."

I changed the subject hurriedly.

"Well, child, it's delightful having you with us."

"I love being with you," she replied tranquilly.

My own tranquillity of mind, achieved after travailings and groanings, abandoned me. I was humiliatingly conscious of the woman, not the child. Perhaps, then and there, she ceased to be a child to me. When she spoke again I fancied that I detected a maternal inflection in her soft voice.

"Would you like to go to sleep again?"

"Tch! Tch! You mustn't pull my leg, my aged and infirm leg."

Not bad—on the spur of the moment.

"You aren't aged or infirm——"

"My sciatica——"

She laughed at me.

"I don't believe in your sciatica. Matilda told me all about it. Your sciatica is a weapon which you use in emergencies against Mrs. Willing."

She laughed again. If I had been twenty, or even fifteen years younger——! All along that confounded stretch of warm brown sand were youthful couples thoroughly enjoying themselves. When we passed them—and I hardly dared to look at them—Matilda and Jemima giggled and made absurd remarks, calling my attention (and Ursula's) to each Jack and Jill.

"The world," observed Matilda, "is going round and round for them."

Matilda borrows some of my pet phrases.

However, children—bless 'em!—have often saved as well as created an embarrassing situation. Jemima called for Ursula:

"Coming," she replied.

But she never budged.

And then I saw Matilda whispering to Jemima, and I knew what she said:

"You fathead! Leave Uncle Jack with Aunt Jill."

A second later, Jemima piped up:

"You needn't come yet, Ursula. We'll call again when we want you."

Fortunately Ursula didn't see the little wretches. She was looking at me, as she ought to have looked at poor Geoff, beamingly!

"Talk to me, Uncle Jim. Tell me about your book. I love to listen to your stories of the eighteenth century. What a wonderful memory you have."

Once more, I felt Mother Earth firm beneath my feet, and yet I said the wrong thing, speaking merely to cover my own bewilderment:

"Have you a good memory, my dear?"

Another girl might have thought that I was pumping her. To my relief, she replied simply:

"I suppose I was about three when I went to the Vicarage. I can remember nothing before that except a name—Babette. Why that comes back to me, I don't know. Mrs. Berridge thinks I must have had a French nurse of that name. She says that I talked French, and that my accent was better then than now."

So Geoff had made a shrewd guess. Yes; Wilson must have taken his child to France or Belgium, where probably she forgot the little English she knew, and with it all memories of Yorkshire.

Ursula went on, reminiscently:

"I remember a garden where I made cages for butterflies; I do hope I let them go; and I remember a delicious crisp sort of pancake. And that, Uncle Jim, is all. It wouldn't make a big book, would it ? "

" Um ! A book that could set down childhood as it is, and as it ought to be, written by a truthful child, would be a wonder-book."

I was still talking aimlessly, uneasily conscious that Ursula was too near me, almost touching me. Her hand, slim, brown and capable, was caressing the warm sand, picking it up and letting it trickle through her fingers. The sands of time were trickling through mine. If she wanted me, dare I take her ? Could I give her happiness, joyousness—those great gifts of the gods ? Shortly before I took Mote Farm I had effected a small life insurance in favour of the children, easily paid out of income. The doctor who " vetted " me perpetrated a mild jest : " I predict," said he, " that you will pay your premiums for the next thirty years."

I could offer Ursula twenty years.

If she wanted me——?

That question seemed to paralyse me.

IV

She asked presently if I had reconsidered buying Mote Farm ; and this led naturally to a remark from her of some importance. Allen—I suppose I must still call him that—had told her that he expected to leave England in three months' time. He could not possibly do what he had to do in haste.

This information relieved me. It gave, what I needed so sorely, a bit more rope.

We had tea on the sands, and then paddled. A delightful afternoon if the sword of irresolution had not impended above my unhappy head.

After dinner we made up a "four" at bridge. The heat of the day broke in a thunderstorm and we could not go into the garden. Agatha has her own system of playing bridge. In a general way she acknowledges that I know more about it than she does, for I spend much time over it which she thinks I might employ better, while she plays—so she says—merely to oblige others. It doesn't do to rely upon my superior knowledge in giving instruction, for whatever I say that doesn't suit her provokes a reply that I said exactly the opposite the last time I ventured upon criticism. As she is a magnificent card-holder, her confidence in primitive tactics is too often justified by results.

Agatha proposed that she and Ursula should be partners against Geoff and me. It looked like robbery under arms, but as the stakes were only sixpence a hundred I agreed to this. Agatha insinuated that our rubber might be a test of the finicking rules that I made such a fuss over. Dash it! They won the rubber in two hands, scoring for Grand Slam, Little Slam, a hundred aces and a revoke; and we had only eighteen for chicane above the line and nothing below it. Perhaps I was a fool to point out to Agatha that the Little Slam might have been a Grand Slam had I played her hand, especially as it was I who revoked, owing to Geoffrey's carelessness in failing to ask me if I had any more diamonds.

I have mentioned this incident because it led to ructions. Geoffrey, you see, had been on edge ever since Ursula entered the house. I knew he would be, which accounted for my being a trifle short with Agatha. I was on edge myself. Geoff, as a rule, is a good loser, but his mother's self-praise was too much for him. He said irritably:

"You held every card in your hand and dummy's. Uncle Jim, my dear mother, has forgotten more about bridge than you ever knew."

"Yes; he forgot that he had a diamond in his hand just now."

At this Geoff scowled, whereas I grinned. I don't know which annoyed poor Agatha the most.

"If you can't play bridge without losing your temper, you ought not to play at all."

"Right," said Geoff, stalking from the table.

Most unfortunate, because it gave Ursula a wrong impression of the boy. Agatha retreated majestically to her arm-chair. I began to teach Ursula piquet. Certainly she had aptitudes for cards and, with a little schooling, would make a sound player. But Geoff's leaving the card-table threw us together for the rest of the evening. The clause in the Lord's Prayer which I repeated that night with fervour is: "Lead us not into temptation."

On the Tuesday Allen wired Ursula to say that he was stopping two more days in London. What could we do except ask her to stay on? I felt that I was being hounded down flowery slopes and dragging Ursula with me.

I tried to analyse her attitude towards me. It was obvious by this time that she preferred my society to Geoff's. He saw that and kept out of the way, which made matters ten times more difficult for me. It was likely, so I reflected, that the attraction which I seemed to have inspired was merely a young girl's half-unconscious exploring of possibilities. Her ease of manner, the absence of shyness, confirmed the hypothesis. Geoff touched me on the raw when he affirmed that I got my psychology out of novels. Where else could I get it? I'm not a medical student, thank God! In novels, the best novels, a young girl in love gives herself dead away to the ordinary reader because she treats the hero, either with disdain or with a saccharine coyness which would drive me to the bottle. From the moment the heroine snubs the hero I know where I am. In some of our more recent plays, the young lady—too often a flapper—hurls herself at the young man's head and bites him in the neck! Disgusting, as Agatha remarks.

But Ursula's methods—if she has any methods—are not cut to any such patterns. She likes to be with me, and she says so without the mantling blush, just as Jemima does. Yesterday she called me a "lamb" without any provocation on my part. It is my belief that if I did have the effrontery to ask her to marry me she would open wide her unblinking eyes and reply sweetly: "Oh, Uncle Jim, is a niece allowed to marry her uncle?"

How many sorts of a fool should I look then? I have transcribed the above passage just as it stands from my diary.

V

On the following Thursday we were in the orchard—Ursula, the chick-a-biddies and myself. As it was Ursula's last morning, I had persuaded Agatha to let the children off their domestic duties (they make their own beds and so forth) and the reading aloud. Children should be accustomed to "do" things, and not watch them being done. Agatha and I, as youngsters, had to roll and mow our tennis court, and mark it out, too. We took honest pride in it. Some modern children have everything done for them, and I'm not surprised that they are bored to tears. Why, bless me! I remember rating a nursemaid who was wiping Jemima's nose when she was nearly four——!

However . . . I am vagabonding again.

We were making gardens, a fascinating game, particularly for children brought up in London. I had offered a prize. Our orchard lies below the kitchen garden and slopes to the Yeld. Near it is a dell, full of ferns, mosses and wild flowers, a sort of happy hunting ground for such a game as this. Each garden was to be laid out under the shade of an apple tree. Peabody had told me that the orchard yielded some "marvellous" pippins, but they were still in the green stage, too green even for Jemima's catholic taste.

The three of them worked like Boy Scouts. I have identified myself with this admirable movement—and go into camp with a lot of urchins for a week each year—because here again initiative is cleverly inculcated. "B.-P." ought to get the Order of Merit for that alone.

Time was the essence of my contract with my fellow-workers. I was making a garden myself, but I was careful to copy, as closely as possible, a garden designed by Matilda, which had won a prize a fortnight before. When she saw it, her scathing criticisms upon me as a plagiarist tickled my sense of humour, and it was unanimously agreed that I had forfeited any right to my own prize. I accepted disqualification humbly. Sometimes it occurs to me that I should have made my mark on the stage as a character actor.

The prize—a few shillings—had to be divided between Jemima and Matilda, not without protest on their part. I was shocked when there and then Matilda tossed up a shilling to determine which of the two should take the pool, but protest died on my lips, because Jemima pointed out to me that I was a gambler.

"And so is Deacon—*and* Mrs. Deacon."

"What?"

"They put a bit on what they fancy, just as you do."

I beheld myself, ruefully, as a corrupter of faithful retainers—*and Youth.* Still, when Matilda won the five bob, it pleased me to notice that Jemima accepted her losses with a fat smile. It would have pleased old Montaigne.

Up till then it had been a jolly morning, a memorable morning. The Orb of Day seemed to be beaming approval upon our simple labours.

I had put on my coat, and was sitting near my own despised garden, wondering whether I could sneak away and do a quiet little shandygaff, which I had earned. Would that I had——!

Even now, I cannot make up my mind whether or not I was the victim of what is called in the vulgar tongue a "put-up job." I have misgivings on the subject, the more poignant because I detest sharp-dealing. In children it is rank blasphemy against the holy spirit of innocence.

However——

Matilda suggested that I should beguile an idle moment (I was planning further exercises) by telling Ursula's fortune. Without waiting for my answer, Ursula eagerly stretched out a pink, grubby palm and said with enthusiasm:

"Do."

The very monosyllable which I had used to quicken their activities.

Well, I did.

Mr. Allen *Chapter VIII*

I

I DON'T say that I believe in telling fortunes by interpreting the lines upon the hand, but they do indicate character, and at one time I studied carefully a textbook entitled "Les Mystères de la Main." I came to the conclusion that there was something in it; not much, but something. Agatha ridiculed this, as she would. More, she hinted (I am speaking of the time when I was at Cambridge) that I had studied a ridiculous art, and wasted valuable time, for the base purpose of improving my *technique* as a flirt.

A flirt——! I—I—who have never flirted, never! Flirtation, as I interpret the word, is a synonym for deception. A man or a woman affects an interest in another which is make-believe. The other too often falls a victim. Our novels are full of such "miching mallecho."

Again, I remember that the word "technique" annoyed me. At Cambridge I was as simple as Verdant Green. Agatha, to the day of her death, will attempt to "have it both ways," a feminine weakness. It was ridiculous to accuse me of having a "technique" and then in the same breath stultify herself by asserting that I thought of absolutely nothing but having a good time. Her words came back to me:

"You like to hold a pretty hand in yours. My hand is *not* pretty. Have you ever tried to tell my fortune?"

"Your fortune, Aggie" (sometimes I called her "Naggie"), "is not to be found in your hand or on your face. It will be found in your dominating disposition. Had you worn trousers you would have become Lord Mayor of London."

At that time our uncle, Sir Augustus Pollen, was in full bloom.

Well, I told Ursula's character, not her fortune, and Jemima and Matilda listened, giggling derisively. But Ursula was visibly impressed. I hasten to add that I don't accuse her of being a party to the "put-up job." The responsibility of that must be divided equally between the whelps. I repeat, Ursula was impressed. And I swear that the lines on her hand confirmed my own independent reading of her character. I deciphered (from the lines and mounts) sincerity, truthfulness, a little harmless vanity, and tenacity of purpose. She was quite satisfied.

As she withdrew her hand (I had resisted the temptation to squeeze it), Matilda said impudently:

"What a rotten fortune! I can knock spots out of that." (If Agatha had heard her!) "Give me your paw, Ursie."

Ursula laughed and held out her hand.

I lay back, half closing my eyes, and half expecting a bit of fun. I have said that Matilda has humour, and I wondered what use she would make of it. You can take it from me that I was absolutely unprepared for what followed. And I dared not stop the imp till she had finished, because, with precocious cleverness, she worked up to her climax. What confirms me in my conviction that the whole thing had been *rehearsed* was her glibness, and the fact that Jemima, little traitor, nodded approvingly from time to time.

Matilda adopted a sing-song monotone, oddly effective, such as gipsies use.

"A happy hand and a good hand" (this was cribbed from me). "I see health and life before 'ee" (not mine). "A long life, fruitful of good works" (mine), "and I sees two men."

"Only two?" asked Ursula.

"Shush-h-h! Yes, my pretty lady, I sees two men. But one is a wash-out. He be tall and dark——"

That was the moment when I should have moved the closure. But "tall and dark" were adjectives that I had bestowed upon Jemima's future husband, because she is short and fair. So my suspicions were not aroused.

"He be tall an' dark, my pretty, an' a damn' sight too fond of havin' his own way, which bain't your way."

Here I did interrupt:

"Tch! Tch! Little girls of ten mustn't use that naughty word."

"I'm nearly eleven," said Matilda; "and you've forgotten, Uncle Jim, *I'm* not talking. It's the old gipper whom we met last hols in the New Forest."

"Pray, don't interrupt," shrilled Jemima. "You have told us it's not good manners."

I held my tongue, and Matilda went on, warming to her evil work.

"T'other man may be just right for 'ee, a very proper gen'leman, and well able to give 'ee what you wants, which is what all we women-folks wants—a good home. An' you wants 'un, same as he wants you. An' don't 'ee be afeard to tell 'un so, when kissin' time comes along, 'cause he be timid-like wi' young females, although he don't allow that 'tis so. He be older than you, my pretty, but you has sense enough to know a soft thing when you sees it. An' now, if you don't know who I be talkin' about, why, you up an' ax Mister Pollen."

With that she dropped Ursula's hand, screamed with laughter, and fled—followed by Jemima.

I was so flustered, so aghast, that I stared at Ursula, tongue-tied.

Then she burst into tears.

II

That morning, as I was shaving—and I remember that I had slipped a new blade into my Gillette razor—I said to myself: "James, you are now bomb-proof." I do occasionally talk aloud—a sign of senility, I fear, but there it is. After all the excitements of the previous week I had regained my normal composure. And since the game of piquet I had not allowed myself to be alone with Ursula, an act of self-abnegation with a compensating glow.

And, at the last moment, when I deemed myself immune from temptation, this horrible thing happened.

Possibly tears, genuine tears (not caterwaulings), affect me, because I'm a Pollen. We are not a whining, crying family. When poor Willing died I was with Agatha. She broke down. It was terrible. She had been the best of wives to him, and I told her so, but she thought that she might have done more for him. I felt the same. Everybody feels the same. The "little more," and all that. Her grief stunned me. I had no idea that any woman's lachrymatory glands could stand such a strain. She made me cry, although I kept on telling myself that Willing's death after a long, incurable illness was a blessed release. At such moments one thinks in platitudes——

However——

Ursula wept copiously. Tears rained down her cheeks.

She kept on saying: "Oh!" And I kept on saying: "Don't!" A fusillade of "Ohs" and "Don'ts." Idiotic, I admit; but aren't we all idiots when our feelings overmaster us?

You see, revelation had come to me blindingly. She had cried when Geoff proposed, because she didn't love him; she cried now because she did love me, or thought she did. Same thing.

I couldn't help it. I took her in my arms and kissed her. I felt extraordinarily happy, although she went on crying, but they were tears of healing, not of shame and misery. She just raised her sweet face to mine and kissed me, as a child might have done, not caring that its face was wet. I didn't mind that either, although I took out my handkerchief and dried her cheeks. Extreme happiness is apt to make me light-headed, but I haven't had much extreme happiness in my life—

Agatha says I have specialised in comfort. I stammered out:

"This is r-r-refreshing."

"You *do* love me, Uncle Jim; you are not pretending?"

"You blessed child—you're adorable. But, dash it all, do you realise what all this means?"

Her answer was reassuring at the time:

"It means, darling Uncle Jim, that you will buy Mote Farm, and that we shall live in it, and love each other for ever and ever."

I exclaimed reverentially:

"Amen."

III

I fear the children saw me kissing Ursula. Otherwise, how can we account for the appearance of Agatha in the orchard? She came suddenly upon us, finding me with my arm round Ursula's waist and her head on my shoulder. I jumped up.

"Ursula and I," said I, "are thinking of going abroad. Would you recommend Switzerland or the Italian lakes in, say, late September?"

"I think I should recommend a lunatic asylum—co-educational," replied my sister.

Agatha is no fool. She smiled as she spoke, and I saw, to my intense relief, that she understood and, what was of far more importance—*approved.*

"Now you know," she observed blandly, "why I asked Ursula to come here. I have seen how it was with you and her from the beginning, or, at any rate, from the very moment when she refused Geoffrey."

No; I am not bomb-proof. I never shall be till all women leave this planet for another.

"You have often said, Agatha, that I'm incapable of looking after myself, but I have never agreed with you. Now I am going to look after Ursula."

My sister said rather a nice thing.

"I have never said, Jim, that you couldn't look after others. Ursula will look after you, and she will have her work cut out for her."

I dropped a fraternal kiss upon her cheek. We had dispensed with these Early Christian salutations long ago, but the occasion seemed to demand it.

She accepted the salutation in the spirit in which it was offered; and then she kissed Ursula tenderly. So did I to complete the equilateral triangle.

"I never thought," remarked Agatha, "that you would have had the sense to pick such a sensible little wife."

"He has more sense than anybody I have ever met," replied Ursula, with a squeeze of my arm.

Agatha forbore the obvious retort. Ursula had not met many people. But her swift leaping to my defence was extraordinarily grateful to me. Agatha's remorseless tyranny was at an end. Or, anyway, I should have a stout ally to support me against unprovoked assaults, and no longer be at the mercy of an idomitable will. I asserted my sense of freedom in a happy phrase:

"One effect of Ursula's acceptance of the dregs of a misspent life is that my interest in the eighteenth century has gone to pot. I shall concentrate now upon the twentieth."

Agatha laughed. She was vanquished and knew it.

It is curious to reflect how such an ordinary incident as an engagement may entirely reverse the relation between brother and sister. As proof of this, Agatha asked me to forgive the children.

"I don't know what they've been up to," she observed, "but they rushed into the drawing-room not ten minutes ago, and not only warned me of what had taken place, but intimated, in no uncertain tones—which I begged them to modulate—that they had precipitated the crisis. I haven't the remotest idea of what they have done, or how they did it, but I apprehended instantly—mischief."

I took up a firm, an impregnable position.

"Jemima and Matilda did—er—precipitate the crisis. The less said about what they did the better. I forgive them. But—it must not occur again."

"Occur again! Bless the man! It is a miracle that it occurred once."

With that she left us in our Garden of Eden.

I have written "Garden of Eden," because, after this interruption, I was reminded swiftly of the serpent lurking amongst our rose leaves. Ursula said, shyly:

"Shall I tell father, or will you?"

I had forgotten Allen.

"I will tell him, to-morrow morning."

She looked pleased.

I tried to forget Allen.

I succeeded.

As I washed my hands before luncheon, I gave Agatha great credit for making the best of me before Ursula. It is true that if she had maintained her customary attitude towards me the meek resistance that I put up for the sake of my manhood would have been strongly reinforced by Ursula ; but when did Agatha ever forgo a contest because of the odds against her ? I thanked her when we met for a moment on the staircase.

" You have always encouraged the children to look upon me as a more or less responsible person," I said, " and I'm glad that you've taken that course with Ursula. It's the Pollen loyalty coming out. We do stick together as a family. I want to tell you now, which I couldn't do before Ursula, that I had no more idea of asking her to marry me at the beginning of the crisis which culminated in our engagement than I had of asking Jemima."

" I always understood that you did ask Jemima."

She laughed. Is it possible that this engagement, which is to solve horrible difficulties will turn my sister into something less like Boadicea ? We descended the stairs, arm in arm.

IV

Anybody who knows me, even at my worst, will guess what my feelings were, when I told my dear boy that the girl he loved wished to marry me. Fortunately he was not at luncheon (a merry meal, although I had to sit heavily upon the children), but playing two rounds of golf with Crowhurst. He returned to Mote Farm after I had motored Ursula up to Old Hall. One glimpse at my face sufficed a psychologist.

"I was right," he said.

I trust that was some sorry comfort to him, but I doubt it. Then he grasped my hand.

"The best of everything for both of you, but we won't talk about it, please. You understand. I—I've been a cur in the manger, snapping at everybody, but I pulled myself together to-day. I felt it would happen to-day. And, thank God! she is safe against that devil. Did you suggest a wedding at once?"

"She raised no objection to that. I shall speak to Allen to-morrow."

He looked at me oddly, almost as if I were a younger man than himself.

"Don't forget that he is Wilson."

"As if I could——!"

"I—I mean, being Wilson, he will pose as the courteous Allen till we unmask him."

"You are not suggesting that I should unmask him?"

Again he looked at me queerly.

"Is her fifteen thousand pounds nothing to you?"

For the moment I couldn't see what he was driving at. Fifteen thousand pounds is of course fifteen thousand pounds. I muttered something to that effect. Geoff laughed very grimly:

" You could unmask Allen, when he gives you Ursula and consents, as he will, to an early wedding. You have not forgotten that under the terms of Mrs. Wilson's will, Ursula's money is due upon the day of her wedding ? "

" No."

" If you want that fifteen thousand pounds, or what is left of it, your chance of getting it is dwindling unless you do unmask him."

I groaned.

" You're up against it, Uncle Jim. We had better thrash it out between us, if we can. For his own purposes, and being as he is a monomaniac, Dr. Wilson—if you threatened him with exposure—might, I say *might*, hand over this money, provided you pledged yourself to secrecy till he was in South America. In that case, Ursula might secure her dowry without finding out the appalling facts."

I couldn't grasp much, but I grasped this. The boy had come to this solution of our problem on his own, and evidently after sustained thought. I remained silent, trying to see Allen as Wilson.

" Wilson," said I, after a long pause, " might turn the tables neatly upon me, if we were alone together. Suppose he flatly refused to give his consent to our marriage. That was provided for in the will. And he may have put in the clause, designedly, foreseeing just such a situation as this."

Geoff laughed again,

" You are sharper than I thought, Uncle Jim.

In my opinion, that is quite likely to happen. Still, there is the bare possibility that this devil is not quite so black as he has been painted in the newspaper reports. He may tell you straight out that Ursula has this money."

This pleased me. Really Master Geoff was piling up the marks. The harsh judgments of youth are so indigestible to middle-age. And then, out of my leaky memory, flashed Allen's words, spoken in the train.

"I have always hoped that Ursula would marry a man of independent means, because what money I have may be spent before I die."

I repeated this to Geoff. He remarked curtly:

"That tears our humanity, doesn't it. Your memory, Uncle Jim, is astonishingly good in streaks. You never told me."

"I forgot. It seemed of no importance at the time."

"It is superlatively important now. That is where these super criminals slip up. He was too clever."

I digested this. There seemed to me only one thing to say and I said it:

"We are out to save Ursula, to get her away from this man. Damn the fifteen thousand pounds! You knew that I would take her in what she stands up in, and, by God, I will! I can dissemble with Allen, as he will dissemble with me. Our objective is to get the child out of Old Hall as reasonably soon as possible."

"Or as unreasonably soon," added Geoff.

Looking back now, with the hindsight that swamps foresight, I cannot see how two men could have solved our problem in any other way. Once married to Ursula, able to tell the shocking story at my own time and in my own way, I might then take steps to secure her fortune. Geoff agreed with this.

V

The boy was fairly cheerful at dinner, and very attentive to his mother. This encouraged me to hope that his honest heart had not been organically affected—just a temporary lesion.

I said as much to Agatha, when I was alone with her, and to my relief she went farther than I did. Being Agatha, and catching me without Ursula, she got her knife into me.

" I told you, James, that you forced Geoff's hand. You persuaded him to dash at her."

" Did he tell you that ? "

" Such things don't need telling to persons of ordinary intelligence."

" Does your intelligence, which I have always said is by no means ordinary, tell you that he wasn't tremendously attracted to her at sight ? "

" Fiddle ! I told you before, but of course you have forgotten, as it didn't suit you to believe it, that if the young people had been left alone they might have made a match of it. I should think you must be rather glad now that your busybody habits did have the result that I told you they would have."

"Certainly I had not thought of it in that light."

"No; you seldom look beneath the surface; and you may be thankful that you have those about you who do."

"I am thankful, Agatha. You have stood between me and much that is disagreeable. You are doing so at this moment. Am I to gather that what your trained eye saw beneath the surface was that Geoffrey will soon get over this?"

"Certainly he will. It was naturally a shock for him, because you had persuaded him that she would fly into his arms, and I suppose no man of any spirit likes to be refused unequivocally, especially when——"

"When—what?"

"When he has so much to offer. But I throw no stones at Ursula. If she had accepted him, I dare say they would have got on together. Geoffrey would have made all allowances for her immaturity, and she is good and teachable. She would have learnt to respond to the more intellectual qualities in him, and fitted herself, in time, to be a true helpmeet."

"You hint that her intellectual qualities won't be brought out by me?"

"Oh, well, many women are happy enough without them. I used to tell you that you had it in you to make a nice, sensible girl happy, but you preferred to dangle——"

"Dangle——!"

"Now that you have tumbled into the right sort of marriage, almost by chance, I hope you will take it seriously. I trust that you will not spoil Ursula, as you are always trying to spoil the children. You won't be making the best of her if you teach her to look upon life as all play."

Poor dear woman! If she had known——! I was tempted to tell her everything, and she would have crumbled to dust before my eyes. Still there was a grain of truth in what she said. I have taken life too easily. And that is why I find myself tempest-tossed at the very moment when I fondly believed that I had secured safe harbourage. I have an immense respect and affection for my sister, founded upon the rock of nearly fifty years' intercourse and intimacy, but it isn't really safe to tell any woman a secret so awful as this, any woman, I mean, who is womanly. It would break her up. She would brood over it; she would look harassed and wretched; she would provoke importunate questions from the children and Ursula. Their happy time would be wrecked. It takes stout men, like Geoff and myself, to shoulder such a load with Spartan fortitude. Mind you, she lived with Willing for sixteen years, and nursed him devotedly for the last two. It took it out of the poor soul.

No; Agatha must be spared till the inevitable moment comes, for come it will. That is the fly in my ointment.

VI

I went to bed that night in high health and spirits, with the intention of sleeping soundly.

I hoped that I should dream of Ursula. I had in my dressing-case a few letters, and in one a lock of hair. I burnt them. Then I hopped into bed.

I couldn't sleep.

Somehow, black care assailed me in the very suburbs of slumber. The attack came just as I began to doze off, half nightmare, half reality. The reality was bad enough, having to face Allen in the morning, to shake his hand, to ask, smilingly, for his daughter, knowing that she wasn't his, to act a lie—all this revolted me. But the nightmare was worse. Beyond the sinister figure of Allen, just as he seemed about to fade out of my conscious vision of him, I could see Ursula—far away. She seemed to be calling me, and I couldn't go to her; she entreated help that I was unable to give her. I know that this is a common form of nightmare. Agatha would dismiss it with one word—indigestion. And so would I if that were a true reason. I got out of bed; I took a pinch of bicarbonate of soda; I encircled my head with a handkerchief dipped in cold water; and I washed my hands. These simple remedies against insomnia had never failed me. I slipped once more between my cool sheets—Agatha is very particular about our sheets—and the cursed scenes repeated themselves: Allen and I alone; and then Ursula and I alone, but immeasurably apart.

I lit my lamp—we had no electric light at Mote Farm—and picked up Montaigne.

But he, too, failed me.

At long last I fell asleep.

By any ordinary standard I have lived at the rate of about a year a day for more days (and nights) than I care to count—crowded years at that. And yesterday, when we all went into the orchard, I had decided to thrust Ursula out of my heart, because I told myself that it was impossible that she should care for me.

And to-day!

Really, it is difficult to get used to happiness; you can hardly believe that it is meant for you. When I woke up this morning, refreshed and revitalised, in spite of my bad night, I felt inclined to build a votive temple or sacrifice a kid, or something of that sort.

Am I sacrificing two kids? No; the love that this sweet child has kindled in me seems to increase my love for my own family and I still regard all of them as mine.

As I was dressing I heard Ursula's voice under my window.

"Uncle Jim!"

It didn't strike me as incongruous that she should have called "Uncle Jim."

Her voice was loud and clear. Anybody could hear it, and certainly Agatha, who is an early riser, and does what she calls a little quiet reading before breakfast. Probably she is swallowing her first dose of Congreve.

This adorable creature, who is to enchant all my days, wants me, and therefore she calls to me. It is the privilege of children to summon those they love, and it is a privilege to respond to them.

It moved me that she should still be actuated by her child's love for me, and I must do and say nothing to frighten that from her.

I hurried down to her in the garden. All the trouble that had been encompassing this quiet, beautiful place—driving out its pleasant memories—was arrested. As I kissed her, I had the odd feeling that Time was standing still, awaiting, cap in hand, our good pleasure. There was, indeed, a moat of enchantment around this house and us. We stood together in perpetual sunshine.

Breathlessly—for I fancy she had run most of the way—she explained her dear presence. Her father (at that I winced) had come back late the night before, and, apparently, in good humour. Ursula begged me to see him as soon after breakfast as possible, before he settled down to his work, when interruption might irritate him. I said at once that I would be at Old Hall at ten.

Then I slipped my arm into hers, and we strolled towards Old Hall through the meadow bespangled with myriad threads of gossamer, each thread quivering with dew drops. I was her chosen companion, and I couldn't measure the wonder of it. I put some control upon myself not to spoil the fine flavour of this happy pilgrimage. A man of my age who has had entrusted to him so precious a gift must beware how he comports himself. He isn't loved for his beauty, I imagine, and he had better keep in evidence the qualities that he is loved for. I don't shirk the conviction that there was perhaps too much that was filial in Ursula's love for me. A daughter's love is an exquisite reflection of the divine love, and if her love for me was largely of that quality, I counted myself the most fortunate of men, and dared not try to force the other kind of love.

We parted at the park gates.

" Will it be all right ? " she whispered tremulously.

" Have no fear," said I confidently.

VI

I was punctual to the minute at Old Hall. As I ascended the fine flight of stone steps up to the front door, the clock in the stable yard struck ten. I would not have such a clock on my premises. It boomed out the hours dolefully. I have nothing morbid about me, but a tolling bell depresses me.

The butler opened the door and said that Mr. Allen was " at home." I followed him, down a long corridor, and into a room that I had never entered before.

I could see at a glance that it was the laboratory.

Mr. Allen *Chapter IX*

I

Agatha says that I have a gift for noticing things of trifling importance. This may be partly due to my *expertise* in playing with the children that difficult game of covering with a cloth twenty small objects upon a tray, uncovering them for one minute, re-covering them, and then setting down on paper as many of the objects as you can remember. I'm a champion at this. I can remember all of them.

Allen greeted me pleasantly enough, gripping my hand with his thin fingers. It struck me that the man was looking years younger. He wore a long white linen coat, and apologised for receiving me in his laboratory.

"Have you come to tell me that the roof has fallen in at Mote Farm?"

His strange eyes seemed to be flickering with derisive humour; and I thought to myself that my roof *had* fallen in, as I glanced about me.

The laboratory evidently was an annexe, probably added to the house by Allen when he bought it. Upon a heavy deal table, facing a big window high up in the northern wall, stood a microscope and accessories. There were only two doors, one communicating with the house, and the other, wide open, leading into the garden. All the furnishings were of the plainest and spotlessly clean. I saw a large tiled sink with hot and cold water taps. There were rows of what I discovered afterwards to be incubating ovens for "cultures."

In a large cage I saw a monkey, a diminutive little beast that stared pathetically at me. Monkeys remind me of Jemima. But this monkey seemed to have lost all joy in life. He sat huddled up in a corner, stroking his head with a tiny, attenuated paw; he was horribly thin; he looked the oldest and most melancholy monkey in the world, quite incapable of cracking a nut or a joke.

"That monkey," said Allen, "is suffering from my disease, but I shall cure him as I have cured myself, and present him to the Zoological Society."

I thought of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; and he may have guessed my thoughts.

"What I have done to that monkey and what I am going to do, Pollen, may save thousands of savages from a miserable death."

I turned my eyes from the cage and looked elsewhere.

One side of the room was lined with glazed cases. In these were Allen's "specimens." As I shot an uneasy glance at them, my host said in the same tone as if he were showing me trophies of the chase:

"My heads."

The miniature heads were there, and others, grinning rows of monstrosities. I shall not attempt to describe such revolting objects. I couldn't do them justice. The curious can see them at the Royal College of Surgeons, where, so I understand, they are regarded as "treasures." Instinctively, I turned away from the little "heads" (so small that it seemed incredible that they had belonged to men and women) to the big heads, marvellously preserved and marvellously hideous. Most of them were tattooed, with black lips apart, displaying rows of pointed and stained teeth. I thought to myself that I would cremate the lot if they ever came into Ursula's possession.

The "specimens" were horrible enough, in all conscience, but really I am of opinion that some of the large photographs hanging upon the other walls were more distressing to contemplate. They were of naked savages, obviously taken on the spot—lepers, some of them! All these photographs illustrated disease, and forms of disease happily not familiar to Englishmen who stay at home. As the property of Dr. Wilson, or Mr. Allen, the bacteriologist, they were not out of place in his workshop, but they indicated overwhelmingly the character of the man who stood beside me gloating over them, commenting, with professional indifference, upon them. This was his right "setting." As for me, I felt—and probably looked—sick. To add to my physical discomfort, a rather offensive odour assailed my nose. Possibly I sniffed, for he indicated a chair, into which I subsided, saying quickly:

"You smell my rats. I have been experimenting with rats." Then, with a quick change of tone, he added:

"Tell me what I can do for you."

I told him—haltingly, I fear. Put into crude English, my demand seemed outrageous. Had he been Ursula's real father, he must surely have thought it so.

He said calmly:

"I'm not surprised, and most emphatically I'm pleased. I would prefer not to speak of the business end of it. When you are in London next you can see Ramstock, my solicitor, who has acted for me during many years."

I wondered how many.

"I will give you his address before you leave, Pollen. Do I understand that you are in a hurry to put on the manacles?"

Manacles——!

His levity appalled me, but I preserved somehow a more or less impassive mask. Obviously, he was pleased, and his pleasure made me loathe him. He said incisively:

"I shall leave England with an easier mind, and sell this small Essex property. Do you want to make a bid for Mote Farm?"

My antipathy to him increased, but I replied carelessly:

"May I talk to your solicitor about that?"

"Pray do. If—if I don't come back from the Amazon, Ursula will inherit what I leave behind me."

A chuckle escaped him.

If he had shown any feeling, my feelings might have been less harsh. I recalled Geoff's words: "Ursula is nothing more than a fly to him." Still there was the bare possibility that his solicitor might say something about the child's little fortune. Possibly, too, Allen had instructed him to enlighten me. Believing the worst of him, it occurred to me that such a story as he was hiding from a potential son-in-law could hardly be told at such a moment and by the man himself.

"When do you want to get married, you two?"

I also was a "fly" to him. And his cynical manner conveyed to me that he was the spider—a venomous tarantula—leisurely surveying his victim in the centre of a cunningly prepared web.

"Ursula," said I, "raises no objection to an early wedding, and I—I'm not growing younger, and all that."

He laughed.

"Oh, you're quite young enough. A man is as old as he feels. For instance, I'm a boy this morning."

To rebuke him, I observed as coolly as I could:

"You look a different man, but aren't you running colossal risks in going back to South America?"

"Of course I am," he answered testily; "but, good Lord! if we stopped to consider risks, we might as well be dead and buried. *I am going back.* If we, you and I, could view life with real detachment, seeing clearly all the risks, all the pitfalls, all the cumulative horrors that Fate hides from us, we might refuse to carry on."

There was a desk, a massive affair of oak, not far from the deal table. It was piled high with notebooks, pamphlets, typescript, and what not. Abruptly he sat down, scribbled rapidly a few lines upon a card and handed it to me.

"My solicitor's name and address."

I slipped it into my pocket without looking at it, because my attention was riveted on the speaker, on his amazing vitality, his restlessness and alertness. I had never before, in a fairly long life, been so sensible of suppressed power in another. He dominated me as I make no doubt he dominated every human being with whom he came in contact.

"Ursula is in the garden, under the trees on the lawn. She hasn't spoken to me, but I knew last night."

I was being lightly dismissed, and glad to go.

So I went, through the garden door, into the August sunlight, leaving him with his "heads" and his rats.

II

Once outside, in the fresh warm air, I became myself again. After all, I ought to have been prepared for such a reception. Ursula was mine for the taking. He had flung her at me.

I found her in a hammock, under a noble copper beech, with a wicker table within reach of her hand. Upon it were books, the daily paper and some sewing, but she was lying perfectly still, doing nothing. I stole towards her across the velvety turf, for she hadn't seen me.

"Oh, Uncle Jim—how you startled me!"

She slipped from the hammock, flung her arms about my neck and hugged me.

"Is it all right? Is it?"

It might have been Jemima speaking. Really I had to pinch myself to be sure that I was awake. I kissed her tenderly.

"It is all right."

In the same coaxing fashion that makes some children so attractive, she slipped her hand into mine.

"I can't sit still. Shall we walk and talk? I should love that. I have been lying in the hammock thinking of you—you—you. It was heavenly. Oh! I'm the happiest girl in the world. Everything seems so exactly right."

That, of course, was the wholesome point of view, but I wasn't feeling wholesome. That damnable room, and all it held, blurred my vision of this joyous nymph, ready to dance before me, to dance with me, to whirl me out of my staid, old-bachelor ways.

If I could have done it, as—as God knows!—I longed to do it.

Suddenly her eyes clouded, and I beheld a new Ursula—new, I mean, to me. With my large experience of men and women I ought to have been prepared for the swift change, a natural change, inevitable to any creature of mercurial temperament. From joy she had leapt to sorrow. At that moment I realised that to her such a lightning-like transition was easy, as easy as stepping from light into darkness.

"All is not right," she quavered. "There is something—something you don't wish to tell me."

I had to revise my too hasty conviction that I might have made my mark on the stage. Decidedly I am not a character actor. That room had "done me in." I had what Jemima calls "a squirmishy feeling" in the pit of my stomach, and no happy lie pat to my lips. Without waiting for my reply, she went on in a troubled voice :

"You know. He has told you. I—I understand."

"What can you mean, my darling ?"

"I feel it here," she touched her heart. "There is a dreadful mystery. I have tried not to think of it ; I have indeed. And I did what you told me about the miniature, put it away, out of sight, out of my thoughts, out of the temptation to—to find out, on my own, what I could. But, just now, when you asked father for me, he had to tell you the truth whatever it is. He had to—if—if he is a man of honour."

A man of honour——!

Well, I lied—uphill and down dale. *Geoff couldn't have done it.* It takes an old campaigner all he knows to lie convincingly. And I did it. My distinguished uncle, the Lord Mayor, hinted to me when I was at Cambridge that the Diplomatic Service might be a field for my talents. I'm not sure that he wasn't right. That wise old man may have detected in me qualities for dissimulation that I never suspected. Anyway, they came out now—gushingly.

Fortunately I could say with perfect honesty that Allen had told me nothing. I began with that solemn declaration ; and she accepted it unhesitatingly. Then I slid from the truth with a fluency and (why be childishly modest at my age ?) a skill both surprising and gratifying. I tobogganed, so to speak, down the slippery hill of lies, and, as I did so, had my just reward in seeing the colour flow back into her cheeks and the merry sparkle into her eyes. It struck me, I remember, that it would be sheer waste of time for me, with my creative ability, to deal with the moth-eaten eighteenth century. I would burn my boats, I mean my notes, and embark upon fiction, where fame and fortune awaited me. I ended magnificently:

"Let us admit that Mr. Allen, for reasons which are, no doubt, justifiable, wishes to keep the past from you and me—*and me.* What of it? I have let the past engross my attention; I have let the past sap, yes, sap, energies of mind that should have been devoted to the present. Here and now, I put the past from me. You and I, dearest girl, have the present, the glorious present, confronting us. We have such happiness as is bestowed upon few in our grasp. Let us grasp it!"

I hugged her masterfully, kissing all doubt from her eyes.

"Uncle Jim," she exclaimed, "how perfectly splendid you are!"

I assured myself that I was. Life took on ampler proportions. I don't like lying, because lies come home to roost, and when you start lying on the grand scale you have to keep it up. You establish, I mean, a sort of standard of high mendacity. But I was lying to save her. I felt that I could go on lying and soar to even higher altitudes if I could preserve the damask in her cheeks and the glint in her eyes. Cynics will accuse me of excusing myself. Well, I suffer all such fools gladly.

We walked in the sunny present and talked of an even sunnier future. The child bared her white soul for me. I couldn't find a stain upon it. *I was the first.* At the same time, I was sensible that my little time-sheet was not immaculate. I had, well, *dangled.* Agatha's offensive word came back to me and hurt me. Ursula ought, in the fitness of things, to have had Sir Galahad walking beside her over the camomile-scented lawns and through the yew-encompassed alleys of Old Hall garden. I picked a white rose and pinned it into her frock, insisting that she should select one for my buttonhole with a tinge of pink in it.

The wise girl asked no questions about my not too purple past. I couldn't have lied to her about that, if she had. And I must set down a little sidelight on her character, very illuminating from my angle of view. We spoke of the engagement ring, and I learned that she had many rings. However, all the more glory and delight for me, if I could place upon her slim finger something which made her forget the others. But this is the point. I proposed going to London next day to buy the "manacle." At the same time, I would call upon the family solicitor. I had glanced at the card. Ramstock lived in Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, a very respectable pitch. I didn't speak of him to Ursula.

"Take me with you," she pleaded. And then (this is the sidelight): "If you can't, Uncle Jim, I would sooner you stayed here. I shall love my ring, but I love you ever so much more."

You see? Nothing material and grasping about her.

I had to practise more lying, nothing that strained my expanding imagination. The good old word "business" served my purpose. She was sweetly satisfied.

Then we wandered back into *le pays du tendre.*

III

As a punishment for my lies, Gabriel (I presume) ordained that I should have to lunch with Allen. The butler came out to us with a message to that effect. Just before luncheon there was an embarrassing incident. Allen kissed Ursula in my presence, and handed her a flat shagreen case, saying lightly:

"This is my present; I hope it will please you."

Ursula opened the case and saw a sparkling pendant which delighted her, but I could see at a glance that it was of old paste, handsome enough in its way, but obviously of small value, and not quite the present one might have expected. It was equally obvious that it must have belonged to her mother, but Allen said nothing about that unhappy lady.

"Have you decided upon any date for the wedding?" he asked.

"Not yet," replied Ursula.

I thought he looked slightly disappointed, but his good manners stood by him. In the laboratory I had had an alarming glimpse of Mr. *Hyde*. In the dining-room he became the genial Dr. *Jekyll*. He shared with me a remarkable bottle of claret—Haut Brion, unless my memory fails me—and discussed the finer growths of the Médoc. Upon every subject he can talk with an odd fascinating intelligence when he chooses. He must have fascinated Ursula's mother by his powers of small talk that was not small. I could see that Ursula took pride in his cleverness, in his exhaustive knowledge, for instance, of wines and the processes of wine-making.

After luncheon he hurried back to his laboratory.

When I left Ursula, I walked slowly back to Mote Farm. It was then, I think, that the expediency—I pick the word—of telling the truth to Agatha challenged my attention. I could rely upon her discretion. I could not rely upon it as I wished to do, unless it was made plain to her that ordinary questions must not be put to Allen. When next she met him, not as a mere acquaintance, but as the "father" of the girl I was shortly to marry, it was humanly certain that she would ask questions. I had held my tongue because I wished to spare her terrible anxiety. But now we were in smooth water. Allen had consented to the marriage. Really, I owed it to Agatha to enlighten her concerning the essential facts. She must be told that Allen was Wilson, told about the two trials, and I would spare her Hemingway's comments upon them. Before I did tell her, I consulted Geoff, and I could see that he felt as I did.

"If you don't tell her," he said, "she will upbraid both of us later on. Yes; she will give you beans, Uncle Jim."

Accordingly, I told her, and was mighty glad at the time that I did, because I provoked in her an increasing sympathy for Ursula. But I made the blunder—as will appear in due time—of not telling her about Mrs. Wilson's will. Naturally enough, I wanted to meet Ramstock before I decided definitely that Allen intended to rob Ursula of fifteen thousand pounds.

Agatha, of course, was terribly shocked, but her common sense triumphed, as it always does in big things.

"I understand, James; and I cannot believe that a merciful God would permit dear little Ursula to suffer for the sins of others."

I replied mildly:

"We have Biblical authority for that, my dear."

"I know; but in this case, dreadful as it is, good seems to have emerged out of evil."

I let the bromide pass. Bromides, somehow, soothe Agatha, even when her decks are cleared for action. I must say that she confronted present and future as valiantly as I did. Anyway, I had muzzled her. She said, indeed (having a weakness for cliché) that wild horses would not tear the truth out of her. She kissed me at the end of our long talk, saying hopefully:

" I shall be extra nice to your little girl, Jim."

And she meant it.

IV

I travelled to London on the morrow. From Liverpool Street I hastened to Bond Street, where I picked out half a dozen rings. Out of these Ursula would make the final choice. At the jeweller's I 'phoned Ramstock, and made an appointment with him at two-thirty.

I didn't care for the look of Ramstock. He was fat and pursy, and hardly to be called a gentleman. He seemed anxious to get on friendly terms with me, and held out his hand to be shaken. I couldn't very well refuse to take it, but it was unpleasantly damp. This was due no doubt to the sultry weather, but he might have dispensed me from contact with the humidity of his body. However, he came at once to business, and his head seemed to be clear behind its viscous exterior. He told me that he had received a letter from his client by the first post that day, and congratulated me with an oleaginous smirk upon my engagement. I didn't want any of that, and said:

" There's a little matter of business to settle. It won't take long."

He put on the pompous solicitor.

"I have no doubt, Mr. Pollen, that you can satisfy my client, through me, that you are in a position to support Miss Allen in reasonable comfort."

"I can," I said; and gave him the name of my solicitors.

"A very respectable firm," he observed, which was true, but annoyed me coming from him.

As he made a note, I looked at him and wondered whether he knew that Allen was Wilson. Had he acted for him in that trial in which Wilson fought for his life? I could easily find out, but I thought it probable he had not. I disliked him chiefly because he happened to be fat and greasy, but when I do dislike a person I do dislike him, and I thought that this was just the sort of man that Allen would have used to do his dirty work for him, but to defend his life he would have chosen somebody who would inspire confidence.

He made his note and glanced at me with a false air of frankness.

"Well, Mr. Pollen," he said, leaning back in his chair and perspiring freely, "you will be pleased to hear that my client has already executed a will leaving everything of which he may die possessed to his daughter."

His daughter!

"That's satisfactory as far as it goes, Mr. Ramstock. What about a settlement?"

"Oh, I thought you understood that my client is not prepared to make any settlement before marriage. Hasn't he indicated that to you?"

I flatter myself that he had no idea from my impassive reception of this speech what inward fires were raging in me. The last ray of hope vanished. Allen had become Mr. Hyde for ever and ever. I had taken final leave of Dr. Jekyll.

Allen's villainy was so great that Ramstock's share in it could be of little importance, but his attitude provoked me to find out, if I could, whether he was a well-paid accomplice.

"You are an old friend of Mr. Allen's?" I asked, as lightly as I could.

He wiped his brow, which wanted it, and smiled his bilious smile.

"I don't know whether you'd call me old, Mr. Pollen, but I regard all my clients as friends."

Sebaceous humbug!

I ought to have left it at that. But—as Agatha sometimes tells me—there is an obstinate streak in me. I prefer to call it determination. Few men beginning golf in middle life would have stuck to it as I have.

"I mean, you may have negotiated the buying of the Yeldham property?"

But he was giving nothing away.

"Why do you ask that?"

Another ingratiating smile, which somehow I distrusted profoundly.

"Oh," said I, "I might perhaps be persuaded to buy Mote Farm. Mr. Allen told me that he wished to get rid of the Yeldham property. Naturally it would interest me to learn, at first hand, more about it from the man who, perhaps, negotiated the purchase."

He mopped himself and blinked at me.

"I am instructed, Mr. Pollen, to negotiate the sale of the property. That is all."

Obviously, I couldn't get anything out of him. His pores exuded moisture, but otherwise he was as secretive as anyone I have ever met, and I disliked him more and more.

We talked a little about Mote Farm (the price asked was fair enough) and then I left him.

V

I needed a stiff whisky-and-soda; and I had it in the Silence Room at my club. All my fighting instincts were aroused. Ursula should not be robbed by this cool, calculating scoundrel. Once married to me, safe in my arms, she could be told the truth. Then I would get in touch with the Venners, and then, before he left England, Dr. Wilson would find himself for the third time in the dock. The prospect of dissembling with him further enraged me, but I consoled myself with the reflection that I was fighting this fiend with his own weapons.

I returned to Mote Farm.

Ursula was dining with us, and, before dinner, I had just time to tell Geoff about my interview with Ramstock. Having predicted, as he did, that Ursula's fortune would not be forthcoming, a grim smile stole over his face, but, at heart, he was as furious as I was.

" Don't tell mother, Uncle Jim."

Poor Agatha! Since she was constrained to make sixpence do duty for a shilling, money has assumed undue proportions in her mind. The loss of fifteen thousand pounds would have wrecked her.

Mr Allen *Chapter X*

I

An enchanting week followed—quite beyond me to describe. I had Ursula to myself most of the time; and I can thank God, humbly, that such a privilege was vouchsafed me. The more I saw of her, the less I thought of myself. Not that she was perfect. Perfection would bore me. Her delightful imperfections provoked me to tease her. From long practice with the children I am something of a champion at this game also. She had a quick temper—well, as I have—and a trick of contradicting herself; another of my failings, so Agatha says. But, right or wrong, she was as ready to laugh at herself as at me. After some of our more serious talks, my heart warmed to the Berridges. They had kept sweet and clean this maid's mind. During this week they fussed over her whenever I gave them the chance. I got a rare wigging from Ursula because I poked mild fun at the Vicar and attempted a silly caricature of him in cope and biretta, entitled : " The Lightning Change Artist." Indefensible, as Agatha observed.

Her impassioned defence of Berridge, both as a priest and man, was a proof of her loyalty. Perhaps it is easy to be loyal to those we love ; Ursula was equally loyal to Allen, of whom fortunately we saw little. He asked Agatha and me to dine, and we had to go. Upon that particular evening the awful mischief was done, but I knew nothing of it at the time. Allen, I remember, seemed to go out of his way to be civil to Agatha. I thought afterwards that, caught off her guard, she might have betrayed some distrust of him. But she assures me that this was not so. At the time, she was as ignorant of what really happened as I was. Geoff had been asked, too, but he made some excuse. He said to me :

" I'm watching this blackguard at a disrespectful distance."

Coming back from this dinner, Agatha spoke to me about Allen.

" I believe that he is innocent, James."

" He was acquitted," said I.

" Just so ; we must accept that. And we must admit that he has shown consideration in keeping the awful truth from Ursula. I respect him for that. And he is a generous man."

I knew at once that Agatha had "touched" Allen for one of her innumerable charities. I hate to admit it, but my sister would accept a guinea from Judas Iscariot for her Boys' Boot Club, or her Mothers' Clothing Association. Personally I disapprove of doles in any form. I believe in substantial prizes awarded to merit.

"You were thick as thieves in the drawing-room," I observed carelessly.

Agatha rebuked me.

"If you will use such low expressions, James, I can only rejoice that you have abandoned your book on the eighteenth century."

"I have," I replied, "for the very good reason which has not escaped you."

"It is ridiculous to allude to me and Mr. Allen as thieves. For Ursula's sake, *and yours*, I dined at Old Hall this evening."

"And you whacked into your dinner," said I.

"I ate what was set before me."

"Agatha," I exclaimed, "I have the warmest admiration for you."

This pacified her, but somehow—call it presentiment or what you will—I was uneasy. As Hemingway says, these criminals do slip up on unconsidered bits of peel. When Allen bade me good night, he eyed me ironically. I am sensitive to these social slaps—what man of intelligence is not?—and I left Old Hall conscious that somehow and somewhen Allen's suspicions had been aroused.

The day after this dinner Geoff left Mote Farm. " Just as well," as Matilda remarked to me. He intended to finish his holiday playing golf with a pal at Rye. I lent him the old bus.

It is difficult for me to set down what I felt about Ursula during those days when I was so much alone with her, but this is the place to do it, and I shan't shirk my task out of false delicacy. Ar first I was inclined to think that the child was innocent, or rather ignorant of all that marriage meant. But she wasn't. I recall my confusion (and Agatha's) when Jemima said before her at luncheon :

" Uncle Jim, how many children are you and Ursie going to have ? You can do with quite a lot, can't you ? "

For once in her life Agatha was speechless. My poor old Deacon hastily left the dining-room. Ursula answered the question :

" Not more than six, Jemima."

" Uncle Jim," said Jemima, " can jolly well afford to have as many as he likes."

Agatha recovered her powers of speech, saying austerely :

" Jemima, a large piece of bread-pudding has just fallen from your spoon on to the carpet."

" Must she eat it ? " asked Matilda.

This, happily, served to divert the talk into a less dangerous channel, but it gave me an opportunity. As soon as I was alone with Ursula, I whispered nervously :

"Those children at luncheon—! But now—tell me, my dearest, do your thoughts turn sometimes to—to——"

"Our babies? Why, of course they do, you funny man. And I know exactly what you're going to say."

Did she? I'll swear I didn't. She continued calmly:

"You're wondering whether I shall love my babies more than I do you, aren't you?"

I had to assure her that this idea had not, as yet, entered my head. She went on just as if we were discussing something quite impersonal to ourselves:

"Our babies will be half yours, won't they?" I nodded. "And so, if I do love them too much, you can say to yourself: 'She loves them because they are mine.'"

She laughed ingenuously, mighty well pleased with herself. And then she kissed me. From the first, she had been no niggard with her kisses and she had accused me of not kissing her often enough. But her kisses were light and soft as snowflakes.

Perhaps I looked unhappy. I was thinking that the way of a man with a maid, and such a maid, was not altogether rose-strewn. To my further confounding, and slipping her hand into mine, she whispered—shall I say—maternally:

"Of course Mummy Berridge has talked to me about—about these things. I—I know that babies mean suffering, sacrifice, and often cruel anxieties, but it is gloriously worth while, as she says. And Mummy Berridge is not quite the good stodgy soul that you take her to be, simply because you don't know her. I do. She has never had any babies. She used to call me her dream babe."

She paused a moment, just time for me to whisper back:

"Did she? Well, I think of you as my dream-woman. Go on."

"I should be very unhappy if we didn't have children, Uncle Jim, because when we are old we live again in them, and grow young again. And you are so fond of children, and they all adore you."

I kissed her hand, which lay so confidingly in mine.

"Promise me this," she concluded. "When the time comes when I shan't be able to play golf and tennis with you, and be with you as I have been, you will remember that I want to be, and be kind to me."

Her voice faltered. I can't recall what I said or promised, for I was profoundly moved.

II

The date of the wedding was fixed for the first week in October, and Agatha and Mrs. Berridge were like hounds straining at the leash over the buying of the trousseau. I think they were even more excited than Ursula, although she loved pretty things. Of course I took a seat in the dicky. The village, down to the pot-boy at the "Cat and Fiddle," were agog with enthusiasm over the whole affair. The pot-boy spoke of Ursula to me as "our young lady." I felt that I owned about one per cent. of Miss Allen. Agatha remarked, as if she were composing an obituary notice: "Universally beloved."

By this time I was in a condition of fat complacency which provoked, no doubt, the wrath of the gods. Ursula wanted me, and I wanted Ursula. Within a month we should be indissolubly one. If our relations were passionless, viewing them from a physiological angle, they remained satisfyingly sane and ardent. Passion has never warped me and tormented me, as it does less well-balanced persons. I have read too much about passion in novels not to regard it as ephemeral in its intensity, and an emotion to be kept under strict control. We were both healthy people, and we could face our future together clearly and dispassionately.

The beginning of our terrible troubles stole upon me gradually. I can't remember whether Ursula was coming to me or whether I was going to Ursula. Anyhow we had arranged to meet at three in the afternoon. At two I received a note, which I copy:

Darling Uncle Jim,

I am feeling miserable, quite down and out. I was perfectly well this morning at breakfast, and lay in the hammock as jolly and lazy as a sandboy.

Father talked to me for a few minutes and said how well I looked. Just before luncheon I had a sort of chill, and a funny giddiness. And then I was sick. Father says it is nothing—just a touch of sun. I was in the sun without a hat. Anyway, I am lying down in the drawing-room, resting, and I expect I shall be quite myself by dinner-time. But I'm not up to meeting you or anybody—rather a wreck!

I send you all my kisses and all myself.

Your own,
Ursula.

I was not alarmed, nor was Agatha. Her robust common sense rises to these exigencies. She said calmly:

"Just what might be expected. She has been doing too much. In one word—over-excitement."

"Over-excitement hasn't affected you, my dear."

"I'm never over-excited. Leave the poor child alone, James. You can rely on it that your absence this afternoon will make her little heart grow fonder."

That is how she took it and how I took it, although of the four persons concerned in the wedding—Mrs. Berridge, Agatha, Ursula, and myself—Ursula most assuredly had shown least excitement. But then, who can peer beneath the surface of a young girl's placidity?

I practised my mashie shots alone.

After tea I strolled up to Old Hall, not so much with the intention of seeing Ursula as to inquire after her. The butler, whose smug countenance reassured me, left me in the hall and fetched Allen. There was nothing in his face either to frighten me, and yet I was frightened.

"Ursula is in the drawing-room," he said, as the butler disappeared. "Of course you know that I'm a doctor."

I fancied that he laid slight emphasis upon the "know." I replied guardedly:

"Crowhurst said so."

"Ah! Crowhurst. I'm glad you came up. I was thinking of sending for Crowhurst."

"She is worse?"

"She is not better. Still, she is quite up to seeing you. Crowhurst has always attended her. Pray don't be alarmed!"

But I was. Something indefinably furtive about his manner troubled me; the dismal feeling that this man cared nothing, and was probably annoyed at being interrupted in his own work. Crowhurst would care. I said quickly:

"By all means send for Crowhurst; send for him at once."

"Certainly."

He rang the bell and instructed the butler. Then I went into the drawing-room.

III

Ursula was lying upon a sofa, pale and limp, but in good spirits.

"It's nothing, nothing at all."

A man nearing fifty, if he isn't a fool, knows something about the more ordinary ailments of life. I had suffered from a touch of sun myself, which would account for a very bad headache and nausea. Ursula had a splitting headache. I sat beside her and stroked her forehead, accepting the situation as philosophically as she did. When Agatha has a headache, she manages somehow to pass it on to me. I mean that she, like many excellent women, imposes her trials and tribulations upon others. Matilda dropped on to this when she was seven. "Mummy," she remarked to me, "is cross with Jemima 'cos Susan (the nursemaid) gave notice." Ursula was not cross, and I reflected happily that she was equally dear and sweet in sickness as in health. As I stroked her forehead I noticed that it seemed dry and hot. It occurred to me that she might have a temperature. But I didn't say so. After sitting quietly with her for an hour I went away.

That good fellow, Crowhurst, dropped in at nine, and smoked a cigar with me.

He relieved my anxieties considerably, confirming Allen's diagnosis:

"Slight sunstroke. Probably she will wake to-morrow bright as a button. I have sent up a mild sleeping draught."

On the morrow her condition had slightly changed for the worse. I am not conversant with medical terminology, nor did old Crowhurst inflict it upon me, but he told me just before luncheon that her skin was very dry.

" Might develop into jaundice, Pollen."

I could see that he was worried and perhaps puzzled. Well, what general practitioner isn't, when he is up against symptoms in a patient that may mean anything or nothing ? Evidently he was groping, for his next words brought me gasping out of my chair.

" Possibly—poisoning."

" Good God ! man, what are you saying ? "

He held up a protesting hand and laughed. When he laughed I sat down.

" We are easily poisoned. It seems that Ursula was bitten just above the wrist about two or three days ago."

" By a dog—— ? "

" No, no ; by an insect. In point of fact, by a tiny tick. They live in our bracken, and Ursula passes through the bracken when she pops over here. She found the horrid little beast on her, fully gorged, and pinched it off. Possibly the minute head remained in the puncture. Anyway, there was slight inflammation and induration. I don't affirm positively that this caused the trouble, but it might."

He talked on, enlightening my ignorance, but I wasn't listening any too attentively. I was thinking all the time that my poor little woman was ill, and that the doctor who had attended her all her life couldn't put a finger, except at hazard, upon the cause of the trouble.

After Crowhurst had gone, I sent a telegram to Geoff, asking him to come to me at once. I couldn't see Ursula because she was in bed. Agatha, I knew, would try to laugh my fears out of me. So I went to my room and wrote a long letter to my dear girl. After that I felt easier in my mind.

IV

Geoff arrived very late. Really I was not expecting him till the following day. I had to tell Agatha that I had sent for him, and she expressed some annoyance.

" What a ridiculous fuss-pot you are."

The moment I saw Geoff's clever face, and felt the warm clasp of his capable hand, I knew how wise I had been to send for him. He had to have something to eat, and while he ate I told him all I knew. As I talked his appetite for the good Mrs. Deacon's cold pressed beef seemed to diminish. Finally he jumped up.

" Let us go to your room."

When we got there, I sat down and filled a pipe; he paced up and down.

" I don't like this, Uncle Jim.'

" Nor do I, my boy; still, Crowhurst——"

" Oh! Crowhurst——!"

He spoke, as Allen had done, with the scorn (quite undeserved) of the specialist for the G.P. But, unlike Allen, he apologised handsomely.

"Crowhurst knows his own job, but we may be up against something of which he knows nothing. Please go over all the symptoms again, in order."

Fortunately I had set them down in my diary. Geoff wrote them down also, and then stared at the sheet of notepaper.

"I daren't say what I think," he growled out.

"Geoff, you are putting the wind up me."

He made no reply. I predicted long ago that the boy would climb to the top of his particular tree, because he possesses imagination. Mere technical knowledge is not enough. Too often it grows hidebound.

Presently he spoke again, very intensely :

"You have some faith in me, Uncle Jim—as a doctor, I mean ? "

"The firmest."

"I am speaking as a doctor, or rather as a student who has worked hard under half a dozen famous men. You remember how research work attracted me ? " I nodded. "But I had to scrap it. I couldn't afford it. I—I couldn't let you go on supporting me indefinitely. But I worked for many months under Lorani." I nodded again. Lorani was only a name to me. "Then the great chance came along of working with Lansbury at a small salary. I made fairly good with him. Finally, you planked down a big cheque, and I became his junior partner."

"Why do you tell me what I know?"

"Because I want to rub it in that Lorani is the greatest living authority on obscure relapsing fevers that we have. I can't tell you what I think, because we doctors have good cause to distrust our thoughts. What I think can be tested."

"Tested?"

"Yes—tested. Crowhurst may be right. Ursula may be sickening with jaundice, or she may have been poisoned by some insect. But ticks off the bracken don't poison people. Ticks happen to be most remarkable germ-carriers, but they have to have the poison germ in them before they can carry it. Same applies to mosquitoes. Have you got that?"

I said that I had.

He went on, less portentously.

"I want you, Uncle Jim, to see Allen to-morrow morning, unless we hear from Crowhurst that Ursula is decidedly better. If she is feverish, possibly delirious, you, as her future husband, must insist upon a consultant—the best."

"I should have insisted on that, anyway."

"Let Allen answer you. *This* is my test: If he consents, as he will, to call in some London man, you will say that you must have Lorani. Drop that name on him suddenly, and watch his face. If he winces, if he makes any objection to Lorani, my thoughts will ripen swiftly into words and actions."

I jumped up.

"Geoff, my dear boy, you can't leave it at that.

Share your thoughts with me. I have a right to ask that of you. Your thoughts may help me. You are hinting at horrors."

"I may be wildly wide of the mark. I—I hope that I am. I wanted to spare you, and I haven't spared you. Uncle, I think that Allen knows that you know. If it has come to his knowledge—even if he suspects—that you have read the Wilson trials and Mrs. Wilson's will, he would pick Ursula from his path as she picked that filthy insect from her arm."

I was overwhelmed, yet I managed to stammer out:

"How c-could he know? Certainly I have not given myself away to him, nor have you."

"That I can swear to."

"There remains your mother."

"Yes, there remains—mother."

However, we dropped Agatha out of it. It didn't matter much how Allen had learned that I had established his identity with Wilson. *If he had learnt it*, that alone might well engross our attention. We agreed on this.

I put the matter plainly:

"You are accusing Wilson of another murder——"

"No. He did not murder Mrs. Wilson; he did not forge her will. He is too fiendishly clever for either. I have thrashed it all out, uncle. She had Graves's Disease. Had he waited, she would have died of it. But the dominating impulse of his life drove him, as it may be driving him now. His will dictated her will; he hounded her to her death;

she took the arsenic. I'm not an alienist, but I've read their books. They cite case after case of the 'fixed idea.' Wilson is risking his life in going back to those pestilential jungles. He has guessed, I say, what you are up to. He knows that once married to Ursula, you will demand her fortune. And he has spent it, or is spending it. Ursula stands between him and the Amazon."

"He can't know," I repeated, trying to convince myself.

Geoff stood still, facing me, and the family likeness to Sir Augustus came out strongly. The old boy fought his way unflinchingly to fortune, and died respected if not too well beloved. I had seen Geoff go through a scrum on the football field, when he was a boy at Rugby, younger than most of the players. He astonished me then, just as he was astonishing me now.

"You may have lighted the first match."

"I——? Never!"

"Hold hard! Suppose, suppose, uncle, that this Ramstock knows Allen to be Wilson. He would keep such a secret to himself. You go to him, and you ask certain questions which might warn him that you know. And of course he reports them to his client."

"Good Lord!"

"I'm assuming that Ramstock is respectable. If he knows about the Wilson will——"

"Tchah! If he knows that Allen is Wilson, he knows all about the will."

"Yes," said Geoff. "Yes; we must assume as much, and it reveals Ramstock as a scoundrel as unscrupulous as his client. All the more reason that he should report to that client your questions. Enough to start any clever man on the trail. Go a step farther. You know mother; so do I. One of the best, but not so discreet as she fancies herself. When you two dined at Old Hall, he may have laid a trap for her. I say he may. And she, poor dear, would fall into it, and not know that she had done so."

I groaned.

"Geoff," I exclaimed, "you are forcing me to believe what I can't believe, what revolts me to believe."

"Apply my test to-morrow," he replied quietly.

V

I said nothing to Agatha that night. How could I without arousing her suspicions and provoking questions I was unable to answer? But, recalling Allen's ironical smile, his contemptuous, triumphant expression as he bade me good night, I was simply impotent with apprehension. We had no telephone at Mote Farm; I couldn't ring up Crowhurst or Old Hall; I went to bed worn out. Geoff came into my room.

"Take these, Uncle Jim. They will make you sleep; you must be at your best to-morrow."

I swallowed a couple of tabloids. As Geoff was leaving I called him back.

"Are—are you getting over it?" I asked, not too coherently. He guessed what I meant.

He replied honestly:

"Not yet, but the Rye winds blew some rotten stuff out of me. They say that doctors can't take their own medicine; I can take mine. You thought I was the first with her; really she was the first with me. I hope I'm not a worse man for loving her, but I'm damned if I know—yet. Good night."

I lit the candles on my dressing-table, and stared at my own haggard face. Was Geoff's love for Ursula deeper and stronger than mine? Could he give the child what, perhaps, it was not in me to give?

And what availed such futile questionings if—if Ursula died?

Mr. Allen *Chapter XI*

I

THANKS to Geoff's tabloids I slept soundly but heavily, and had no reason to congratulate myself upon my appearance in the morning. Indeed, at breakfast, Jemima asked me with solicitude: "Have you a pain in your little Mary, Uncle Jim?"

Before I could frame a suitable reply, Matilda said reflectively: "Perhaps Uncle Jim has bots." Agatha dealt with the youngsters faithfully; she is no horsewoman; and I'm sure she suspected that "bots" meant something improper.

"You are very heartless children. Your dear uncle, who is always so considerate to you when you are in trouble, is worrying, perhaps unduly, about Ursula. Please don't speak, Jemima, when your mouth is full, and you, Matilda, don't mention 'bots' again."

The imps were quelled.

Geoff walked with me as far as the park gates, but refused to go any farther.

"I don't want Allen to see me; and don't tell him you sent for me."

We stood still for a minute or two.

"Perhaps," said I, "Allen has never heard of Lorani."

Geoff laughed derisively.

"Lorani is Allen's great rival, and regarded by him, I suspect, as an enemy. Lorani has been treading in the steps of Dutton and Todd. Of course you remember what *they* did in the Congo during the war?" I didn't, but I nodded. "Lorani is watching Allen and Allen is watching Lorani. Independently they may come to similar conclusions about these queer relapsing fevers—tick fevers, they call them."

I nodded again. The boy went on keenly:

"I can tell you this about ticks. All of 'em are much the same. One, *Ornithodorus moubata*, can fast for four years and then infect the host to whom it attaches itself."

"Damn it, Geoff, I can't stick this!"

"Right. I'll wait for you here."

I hurried on, and, by the luck of things, encountered Crowhurst, who stopped his Ford when he saw me.

"She's slightly on the mend," he said cheerily. Then, as I grinned with pleasure, he added quickly: "Mind you, that doesn't mean much yet. Where there is a sort of intermittent fever, sharp rise of temperature, the reaction follows, and the patient recovers swiftly. She is not out of the wood yet."

I decided to go on, but, fortunately, I remembered how touchy doctors are.

"If," said I, "I wanted a second opinion——"

"Why, of course. I will meet any man you fancy."

"What about Lorani?"

"Lorani? Certainly. He's about the biggest man we have on tropical diseases. Why Lorani?"

"I want the best, Crowhurst."

"Yes, yes; of course you do. But we aren't in the Congo, are we?"

I felt that I was in the middle of next week, but I kept that to myself. Crowhurst said a last word:

"I shall be glad to meet Lorani. I am a bit puzzled. Ursula is such a robust young woman. She is better, I repeat, but she may be worse in twenty-four hours."

That clinched the matter. Lorani should meet Crowhurst within the twenty-four hours, if it cost me a hundred guineas.

Allen came to me in the drawing-room.

"Did you meet Crowhurst?" he asked. "Ah, you did. Well, Crowhurst is pleased with his patient."

"And you——?"

He shrugged his gaunt shoulders.

"Ursula is not my patient. She appears to be well enough to want to get up, but Crowhurst forbade that."

"I am very anxious."

"Naturally; so am I."

"I asked Crowhurst just now if he would mind a second opinion."

"If you wish it—by all means."

He spoke pleasantly, but his eyes were on mine, and I marked a curious contraction of the pupils. As I paused, he continued in the same tone: "Crowhurst suggested, I dare say, one of the Chelmsford fellows—I forget their names."

"No; I suggested a man to him, a London man."

He asked me sharply:

"Whom——?"

"Lorani."

The test, if test it were, was half successful. I do not say he winced, but, obviously, he was startled out of his self-possession. And then, in a flash, the expression of his face changed. He smiled agreeably.

" Lorani, if he is your choice. Shall I send for him, or will you ? "

" You must really allow this to be my affair——"

" If you put it like that——"

He smiled again, not so agreeably, and in two minutes I was striding back towards Geoff. His test, indisputably, had failed. So far from objecting to Lorani, Allen had seemed almost pleased that I had chosen his great rival.

Geoff, it transpired, had had a word with Crowhurst, and I guessed that one doctor talking to another might have said more than he cared to tell a mere layman.

" Allen raises no objections to Lorani."

" Good—and more than good. We'll ring him up instanter. I know his hours ; he'll be at home."

We hurried off to the Yeldham post office. Of course the usual exasperating delay followed, but ultimately we got through. Geoff went into the telephone box, and, to my surprise, was out again in less than a minute. His face was white and drawn.

" Lorani," he said hoarsely, " is in Italy. He won't return to London for three weeks."

We walked on in silence, out of the post office, and a few yards down the village street. Geoff said in the same strained voice :

" Allen must have known that he was in Italy."

II

I begged him rather irritably not to be so positive.

Allen might know about Lorani's movements, or he might not. Of course I was sensible that at my age one has no longer the resiliency of youth ; sensible, too, with a jealous pang, that my nephew was rising to these terrible exigencies and that I, with all my experience behind me, was sinking into a bottomless morass. I could not throw his years into his face, because I remembered Napoleon at Lodi, Gaston de Foix at Ravenna, Pitt, Prime Minister at twenty-six, and all that. Youth is no disability when it is directed by good brains and sustained by a stout body. When I began this chronicle I swore to myself that I would be honest, and not shirk writing myself down an ass, if needs be. After all an ass is a good sensible animal, a philosopher, munching his thistles, and doing well on them. And an ass probably perceives, with a sly twitch of his ears, the humours of the roadside. If I were witnessing my own funeral, I'm sure I should be somewhat amused and entertained by the behaviour of the mourners. On edge as I was during these dreadful days, the extremes of tragedy and comedy seemed to meet in my bewildered mind. Possibly Nero fiddled when Rome was burning, because, if he hadn't, he would have hurled himself into the flames.

Geoff, I must admit, bore with me patiently. And this was greatly to his credit, inasmuch as he, too, was reeling under these cumulative shocks.

" Allen, Uncle Jim, would know about Lorani's movements, because they are working on parallel lines. Lorani's field is the Congo; Allen's the Amazon. Allen is simply mad to get back to his field, because Lorani might chuck his work in London and be off to South America to-morrow. It would be just like him. And it is certain that Lorani's movements would be printed in research pamphlets. Allen has to read them."

"I dare say you are right, Geoff. But I ask you—where are we now?" He made no reply. "Did Crowhurst tell you anything, as doctor to doctor?"

We had passed out of the village and were nearing Mote Farm. The peace of the place seemed to settle on me like a soft pall of mist. It was simply unaccountable that these things should be happening in this remote rural district and to such a man as myself.

"Yes; he said something, not much. You can take it from me, uncle, that Crowhurst is out of his depth—and he knows it, poor devil! These general practitioners suffer under mortifying limitations. They can do their job well up to a point. Then they strike a snag, baffling symptoms, a welter of contradicting evidence. I'll bet Crowhurst has been up half the night, digging into books hopelessly out of date, trying to reconcile this with that, and so forth. Yes; he spoke to me of a rash encircling the throat."

"Well——? Does that mean anything?"

"It might mean everything; it might mean"—he lowered his voice—"conclusive evidence that

Ursula was poisoned by that tick, placed on her, or near her, by this villain."

"Good Lord deliver us!"

"I hope that He will. I must go to London at once, not lose a minute."

"To find another Lorani?"

"To bring back my microscope and certain stains and reagents. Uncle, if you have any faith in me, I am going to test it to the uttermost limit." He didn't wait for any assurance from me, but went on eagerly: "There are other men. Lots of them. But none with Lorani's colossal experience of relapsing fevers. I know something of his technique, because I worked with him. I know one of his assistants in London. I can get from him what I want, but the most important thing I must get for myself—blood from Ursula. The cause of any relapsing fever is a specific organism in the blood. If I find that, we do know where we are. If we don't find it, I'm utterly wrong."

I could not quite see what he was driving at, and said so.

"You have asked for a second opinion. Dare you take the responsibility of calling me in? Allen, if I am right in my beastly conjectures, will raise no objections. He thinks that I'm an ear and throat specialist. Crowhurst will accept me as a consultant, because already I have inspired confidence in him. He knows that I have done a lot of research work."

I hesitated, as well I might. If Geoff was right, and with every word he spoke the conviction deepened and festered that he was right, not a minute could be wasted. Then, on the sharp thorns of indecision, my mind flew off.

" But, my dear boy, tell me frankly, is there any probability of Ursula dying suddenly at the hands of this man ? "

" No," he said emphatically. " These fevers are slow but very deadly unless treated promptly. The South American variety may be worse than the African. Even Lorani doesn't know that. But Allen is too clever to meddle with Nature. We can rely on that from our knowledge of his character and what he did before. He is counting confidently on the general ignorance and his particular knowledge ; he will stand outside this case ; he will leave Ursula in Crowhurst's hands ; he hopes to get, in due time, from Crowhurst a death certificate from which he will be safe, absolutely immune. A sudden death would mean an inquest, publicity. We, of course, would denounce him as Wilson. He knows that. He will move, believe me, with the utmost caution. That is what we are up against, the subtle, sinuous approach of an unseen snake."

" Geoff, this is more than I can bear."

" Poor Uncle Jim ! Cheer up ! Together we'll win through, even with the odds against us. But —dare you call me in ? "

" Yes," said I.

III

Geoff and I motored to London together in the new car, which my nephew drove admirably. Little things count tremendously at big moments. I couldn't have driven that high-powered car through the suburban traffic and the City. Geoff's cool nerves fortified my faith in him. I had the feeling that I wanted half a dozen of the best men in London sitting in consultation over my dear girl, and yet my confidence in this young fellow waxed instead of waned. He sped along the unfrequented long levels of road ; he slipped slowly and easily through the narrow, congested streets of the small towns. I stared at his bare hands on the wheel, his calm, steadfast face, and held my tongue. It was all I could do.

Agatha accepted my lies, and asked no importunate questions. The apparent fact that Geoff and I were taking a " day off " reassured her as to Ursula's condition. Matilda and Jemima made sure that I was buying my trousseau.

" You ought to have white silk pyjamas," said Jemima.

" Pale blue," amended Matilda. " All bridegrooms are in a blue funk."

Where do children dig up these astounding ideas ?

We separated at the Buskin. Geoff put the car into a garage and hurried off to Wimpole Street. I did buy some few unmentionables (to satisfy the whelps) and felt abjectly miserable doing so. Anyway, a large box of chocolates would keep their too lively tongues from wagging. To satisfy Agatha, and keep her quiet, I dropped in at my solicitor's, who proceeded to bang me on the head, when—Heaven knows!—I was stunned already.

" We have seen Mr. Ramstock, of Old Square."

" Oh ! "

The head of the firm, whom I have known for thirty years, looked down his long nose and fiddled with some ancient documents. Why do family solicitors keep these stained papers on their desks ? Is it part of the " plant " ? Why, also, do they lumber up their rooms with large tin boxes ? And why are the names and titles of their more distinguished clients so aggressively *en évidence* ? Where, I ask, is *my* box, with *my* not undistinguished name on it ?

However . . .

" We are surprised, Mr. Pollen, that he is in Old Square."

" Why ? "

" Um ! Strictly between ourselves, Mr. Ramstock does not stand—a—too—a—*high* in our profession. He acted, as you are no doubt aware, in the—a—notorious Bellingham-Wapshott case." I nodded. What was the use of telling this old dodderer that I had never heard of Bellingham or Wapshott ? " He did not come out of it with—a—altogether—um—clean hands."

" That is Mr. Allen's affair, not ours. Let Mr.

Allen send Mr. Ramstock a cake of soap, if he wants to."

"Quite—quite, still——"

"You have me sitting. Fire away!"

Well, he did, or rather he didn't. These encrusted verbosities can't make a clean shot at anything or anybody. But I gathered just what I had expected and was prepared for, viz., Mr. Ramstock acting for Mr. Allen was an "all take" and "no give" gentleman. I'm afraid I shocked a very worthy soul, who looks as if he handed round the plate in church, by saying testily:

"I don't care a tinker's damn. You see to it that my wife is suitably provided for out of my money. I can't take it with me, can I?"

"N-n-no!"

"My sister and her children are provided for already. It might simplify matters if we cut a lot of cackle and make my wife my residuary legatee."

"Um!"

Of course I was a thought sharp with him, but I was thinking all the time: *Will Ursula be my wife?*

"We must consider your unborn children, Mr. Pollen."

"You do what you think proper, and send a rough draft to me."

He got one in then.

"Do you read carefully our rough drafts?"

I nodded again. Nods are invaluable when one is, so to speak, up a tree.

We parted firm friends.

IV

Geoff lunched with me at the club, but neither of us could tackle the good food. Geoff had collected his microscope and all that he wanted, including some information from Lorani's assistant, evidently another thruster.

" Lorani is on some important mission, and for the moment the slave of the Italian Government. There isn't a dog's chance of his coming back till the three weeks are up. I gleaned this : Allen knows that Lorani is in Rome. They have been corresponding, although they have never met in the flesh. I know you hate our patter, Uncle Jim, but I must tell you something about this accursed disease. I'll spare you, as much as I can, jaw-breaking names. These fevers are being studied all over the world. They are characterised by sudden onset, after an incubation of from two to ten days ; they occur in Europe, Asia, Africa and America. They vary in intensity. Injections of salversan are used to destoy the delicate spiral filaments found in the blood corpuscles, and plainly to be seen, if stained, under a high-power lens. Lorani and Allen are experimenting along new lines, and they alone know what their lines are.

In the case of Allen, we are up against a dead wall. He says that he has cured himself. But just how virulent his Amazon brand of this fever is, nobody knows but he. In the Congo, Lorani could give him fourteen pounds and romp home; in the Amazon Allen stands alone. He has explored places where no white man has ever been and returned to tell us about them. The awful fact that faces us is—can Lorani, or any other man, treat Ursula's form of relapsing fever, if she has the Amazon variety, to a successful issue?"

I smoked savagely at my cigar. I have never felt murderous, but could I keep my hands off Allen's throat if Geoff detected these devilish filaments in her dear blood?

He continued, more cheerfully:

"My man, who stepped into my billet with Lorani, shed this little ray of sunshine. These fevers do yield quickly to treatment; on the other hand, a young, healthy European girl would be more virulently infected than a savage, because they have inherited a sort of immunity, or, anyway, there is something in their blood which fights the disease. That is all."

I was almost sick in our noble dining-room, with dignified men and women looking down upon me. Fortunately we had reached the post-prandial stage, and half an hour later we were on the King's highway.

At Mote Farm, on our arrival, I found a note from Ursula, in pencil. I copy it, because it illustrates her pluck and consideration for others.

I am better, dear Uncle Jim, but not very grand as old Peabody says. I do wish you could come and sit by my bed and talk to me. Why not? I suppose Aunt Agatha would be shocked. I would put on a sweet little cap, especially for you. I have been having a splendid time with my ring. I'm so glad I chose the turquoise. But father says I must never wash my hands if I have it on. He has been rather nice, popping in and out, and bringing me flowers and papers. I can't read, which is such a bore. Father seems to have the greatest confidence in Dr. Crowhurst, rather surprising, because he is generally so down on all doctors.

I wish I could write some more, but I'm so tired. Forgive this scrawl, won't you? I shall write you pages and pages when they let me sit up.

Does Aunt Agatha think it vulgar to put crosses in a letter? I'm afraid it is rather housemaidy. But I have put one big cross in the corner for you, and two tiny ones for the children. Perhaps I can see them to-morrow.

Don't worry! I expect the sun got jealous. And then he smote me.

I put this away, but not in my dressing-case, because, well, as Jemima says—"*because.*"

It was settled that night between Crowhurst and me that Geoff should see Ursula next day.

From his manner I thought that he was relieved. Thank God! He will speak to Allen about Geoff being called in. (All this I have transcribed, as it stands, out of my diary.)

V

That night I had rather a jolly experience which made me reconsider a too hasty judgment of Jemima. Perhaps she is my favourite, but I hardly dare admit this even to myself. Her remarks at breakfast had hurt me a little. Flippancy is horribly out of place when one is in sore trouble. And yet I am flippant on just such occasions myself, probably to hide my too sensitive feelings.

Anyway, I went to bed early, glad to escape from the others. I was dozing off into a troubled sleep when I heard a tap at the door. I said "Come in," and lit the candle, expecting Geoff. Jemima, in a dressing-gown and slippers, flitted up to me, with her pudgy finger upon her lips.

"Shush-h-h! There is a light under mummy's door."

She added naïvely: "But that dratted Matilda is asleep."

The next moment she was hugging me and crying.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, Uncle Jim, that I was heartless at breakfast. It was beastly of me. 'Cos I know, I do indeed, how miserable you are."

I cuddled her up and comforted her. For

tuppence I could have mingled my tears with hers. She sat on my bed and went on whimpering :

" You will forgive me, won't you ? I can't sleep till you do."

" Tch ! Tch ! Nonsense. You are too old to blub like this. I won't have it. If you don't stop this caterwauling, I shall spank you."

" I wish you would. I—I deserve it."

I made such a feeble attempt at spanking her, that she burst from tears into laughter.

" May I get into bed with you, Uncle Jim ? "

" Tch ! A great fat girl like you ! There wouldn't be room in the bed. What would your mother say ? "

" She couldn't say anything if she didn't know."

We compromised. I sat in a chair and took her upon my knee. She whispered fondly :

" Isn't this heavenly ? Don't talk, darling. Mummy might hear us. You know that I'm with you, and everything is quite all right, isn't it ? "

For the moment it was. Her artless love strengthened me immeasurably, it seemed to percolate through my tired tissues, to revitalise every aching nerve in body and mind. Perhaps the child that is latent in all of us responded to her child's faith in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. And her faith was the Christ faith, rooted in love, purged of all perplexing doubts, clear as the waters of Pharphar and Abana. During the war, my colloquial French and a smattering of Italian secured me a job both on the Somme and on the Piave. My duties took me into the field hospitals. Never shall I forget some of the boys lying desperately wounded and almost beyond human aid. The faith denied to war-seasoned veterans radiated out of them. One died before my eyes—*smiling!* And Jemima's expression quivered out of their parched lips: "It's quite all right." The generals whom I met did not share that unwavering faith. But it came from God. I'm not much of a Churchman. Athanasian metaphysics are too indigestible for me. All that has been added to the simple gospel of love, the hair-splitting arguments, everything with the taint about it of the ecclesiastic forcing his dogma upon others, I distrust profoundly.

And so it came to pass that comfort came to me from this child. She squeezed it into me with her clinging arms. I reflected that I had her, and Matilda, and my gallant Geoff. How rich I was in their love and confidence! How proud of it!

Presently her grip of me relaxed; her soft, plump little body grew even softer.

She was fast asleep.

Mr. Allen *Chapter XII*

I

I CARRIED Jemima to her room and popped her into bed. In the twin bed the "dratted" Matilda slumbered.

And yet, next morning at Family Prayers, which Agatha reads in tones carefully cultivated to impress Providence, Jemima winked audaciously at me.

Distinctly I was feeling happier. My confidence in Geoff increased in geometrical proportion whenever I looked at him. As soon as breakfast was over we hurried down to Crowhurst's house. I smoked a pipe on his lawn, whilst the pair consulted together. Crowhurst knew nothing except that Geoff proposed to take a blood test. But Geoff, of course, would make an independent examination of the patient.

When they joined me, I could see at a glance that Crowhurst was on the best of terms with his consultant; and he told me that Ursula had had no recurrence of fever, and that Allen raised no objections to my nephew seeing her.

" Allen is not alarmed, anyway. He sticks to it that Ursula is suffering from the effects of sunstroke. I must say, Pollen, that I agree with him. A little biliary disturbance, what? which justified my fears of jaundice. I hope that it won't be necessary to examine the blood, which might needlessly alarm a young girl."

I looked at Geoff, who said quietly:

" It is useless to test the blood till the fever recurs. So long as the patient's temperature is below normal, as it is, the blood will tell me nothing. Her temperature first began to rise in the middle of the day, two days ago. It may rise again at precisely the same time to-day. I shall go to Old Hall at twelve, not before."

Another nerve-racking delay.

Nevertheless it was an immense relief to hear that Ursula was no worse, and I suppose my optimistic temperament again got the better of me, although Geoff showed faint reflection of it in his solemn young face.

We returned to Mote Farm, where I wrote a long letter to Ursula. Crowhurst hinted that she might be in an arm-chair during the afternoon ; and in that case I should be allowed to see her. I was aching to see her, but fearful of the change I might find in her.

Perhaps this is the right place to set down, what I found out later. I don't know. The matter is of trifling importance, anyway. I have tried in this chronicle to preserve continuity, but the proper sequence of events tries high more experienced writers than I am.

Agatha and I between us had enlightened Allen. My questions to Ramstock, which he *did* report to his client, simply aroused suspicions that Agatha unwittingly confirmed. Geoff was right. A man of great cunning laid a trap for her. He had his opportunity when I was chattering with Ursula at the other end of the long drawing-room. Machiavelli, I make no doubt, employed just such methods, particularly when he was dealing with women. I have the highest opinion of the sex. Essentially, their loyalty, often to most unworthy men, exceeds our loyalty to them. But any show of confidence seems to arouse in women a very generous impulse to cap confidence with confidence. In my "dangling" days I was often astonished at "secrets" whispered into my ear after I had "unbosomed" myself to some sparkler. Agatha, of course, would say that this was part of my technique as a flirt, an accusation which I repudiate with scorn.

Well, Allen—after Agatha had "touched" him for a grant-in-aid—hinted to her that he was a sorely misunderstood and injured man. I cannot see him in that rôle, but presumably she could and did. Mark his amazing cunning. He must have said to himself: "If she knows that I'm Wilson, and has been instructed to keep that knowledge from me, she may slip up, *if I talk to her as Wilson.*" And Agatha had drunk a glass of champagne at dinner, although ordinarily a Pussy-footer. At dinner, also, Allen had exercised his powers of conversation. I remember that I—hardened as I was against him—listened enthralled to an acccount of some plague-stricken village, where he had fought single-handed against death in its most hideous form. Agatha, who would march into any cottage in Yeldham if children were down with smallpox, must have been thinking: "I don't care; he may be Wilson, but he is a brave man." *And he was.*

Alone with her, Allen seems to have thrown off all reserves; he admitted to her, under a pledge of secrecy, that there was a secret about his past sacredly preserved for the sake of Ursula. He must have wound up my good sister, as one winds up a dollar watch, taking his time over it. Finally, at the right moment he had said: "I am going back to the Amazon, Mrs. Willing, taking my secret with me. Let it be buried there with me, but I am tempted to tell it to you—*now*." And Agatha replied: "Please don't." He knew women. Is there a woman living, worked up to the right pitch, who wouldn't have said: "Please do," if she didn't know the secret. But he fished patiently for more than that. "I want," he said, "to keep it from Ursula for ever. May it never mar her young life." And Agatha replied: "It never shall."

I put this in here, because—re-reading what I have written—I don't want anybody to think that Agatha was a blabber. She slipped up, not knowing that she had slipped; and I am not surprised. She and I were clay in the hands of a master potter.

II

At twelve Geoff saw his patient, but he didn't examine the blood, because there was no recurrence of fever and therefore no possibility of detecting in the corpuscles the filaments he might find in them. He explained to me that these "*spirrilla*" caused the fever. Crowhurst enjoyed a mild triumph, because Ursula appeared to be mending rapidly, and it was arranged that I should see her for half an hour or so in the afternoon.

I have to admit here, very reluctantly, that Geoff irritated me by something in his manner, although I dissembled with him. Crowhurst was chuckling; Geoff remained portentously solemn. As soon as I was alone with the boy, he put on a sort of professional mantle, and talked to me and at me as if he were my uncle instead of my nephew.

"Crowhurst is Crowhurst, and he is crowing. I don't blame him."

"Well, why should you?"

"I'm sorry that he doesn't know what I know. Ursula is, or appears to be, pounds and pounds better. Accordingly Crowhurst, standing on his own little dunghill, flaps his wings and cries 'Cock-a-doodle-do!'"

"And so do I."

"Exactly."

There was an awkward pause. Of course I am humbly aware now that poor old Geoff was doing his best to spare me cruel anxiety without lying. I have never succeeded in pulling off this sort of double event myself. I was cross with him, because really it looked to me as if a rising young doctor was disappointed and humiliated because his diagnosis or prognosis—I don't know t'other from which—was wrong. That was the impression he gave me; and it vexed me horribly that he was not big enough to say cheerily, "I'm mistaken."

However, under pressure from me, the truth, as he saw it, wriggled out of him.

"If she has a relapsing fever, Uncle Jim, this marked improvement in her condition after the first onset of the disease is exactly what I expected. I'd fire into her an injection of salversan, but I couldn't do it without laying before Crowhurst all that I fear and much that he wouldn't understand. In a sense I should have to rebuke Crowhurst before he could understand. And, after all, he may be right. Till we examine the blood, under the right conditions, we don't know where we are."

"You say you expected this marked improvement?"

"Yes; there is always an intermittence. It might last for several days."

"You spoke of a rash round the neck."

"Yes; anything may cause a rash, but this localised rash is significant. We must mark time."

How I hate that silly expression!

He went on, generously enough, to say that he would remain at Mote Farm, although his holiday was up, and that he had Lansbury's consent to do so. What he told Lansbury I don't know, but a very junior partner must have rubbed it in to his senior that more leave was absolutely necessary.

We hurried back to Mote Farm, very late for luncheon.

I should like to record that I was sensibly impressed by what Geoff told me, and so I was up to a point, but I suppose I believed what I wanted to believe. We all come to grief over this kink in our make-up. Really anxiety, in its most ravaging form, is an intermittent fever. We worry till we exhaust our powers of worrying. Then we slide into a fool's paradise.

I wallowed in that paradise when I saw Ursula that afternoon.

She was lying on a sofa, and wearing a pretty dressing-gown. She looked adorable. The word "sublimated" occurred to me as I kissed her and then looked down upon her smiling face. She was pale and thinner. What Agatha unkindly calls "milk-maid beauty" had gone, leaving behind it a grace and distinction incomparably more bewitching.

"All is well, Uncle Jim. But you have been worrying yourself to fiddle strings, you naughty man."

Her laugh tinkled. I grinned fatuously at her.

It is extraordinary how easily one adapts oneself to great happiness—so easily that I can't help thinking it is the appointed lot of mankind; and there is something to be said for the existence of a Personal Devil who thwarts happiness because his attributes won't function where it flourishes. I'm sure that I'm a better man than I was before Ursula engaged herself to me, and probably Agatha takes the same view, though she would not think it advisable to admit as much to me. She has already given Ursula "tips" on how to get me under her small thumb—*and keep me there.* The thumb must be put down and kept down, because the proper place for Man lies under the thumb of Woman, but scope must be left for the squirmings of the victim, and Agatha's view of me is that I shall squirm amiably.

After we had prattled about ourselves along inevitable lines, Ursula spoke of Geoff. She, too, believed what she wanted to believe.

" Dear Geoff thought he was in love with me, but of course he wasn't."

" Of course he was," I protested. An idiotic vanity possessed me. I'm ashamed to set down that I felt ridiculously " bucked " because I—I had won a world's prize-packet against a younger and much better looking fellow.

Ursula continued, reflectively :

" He isn't in love now, Uncle Jimkins ; but he was sweet to me to-day."

" A good bedside manner ? " I hazarded.

" Oh, no, the dear old Crow has that. Geoff, well, I can't quite tell you how Geoff impressed me this morning."

" Try, my darling."

I was curious, and perhaps—let the truth prevail (it does whether we like it or not)—a wee bit jealous.

Ursula frowned, ever so slightly.

" He was the doctor first, last and all the time ; and I'm sure that he is tremendously clever. I had no idea that he was so clever—and so kind. Now the Crow is kind, too, but he isn't clever."

" Why do you say so ? "

She smiled, the little rogue.

"If he were, would he have married Mrs. Crowhurst?"

These women——! The best of them are so hypercritical about other women.

"Perhaps," amended Ursula, "she hadn't that tennis face when he married her. But looks don't matter."

"Oh-ho! Don't they?"

"I mean that either way they don't help a man in his profession. Mrs. Crowhurst might have pushed the Crow out of a country practice into Wimpole Street. But she is more devoted to her garden and her chickens than she is him."

"I take it that Geoff talked to you about Wimpole Street and all it means."

"Yes; he did, and for the first time, too. He said that you had pushed him into Wimpole Street, which I knew. But, somehow, I realised this morning that he would have got there, even without your generous help. You were a darling to help him, but he is one of those splendid men who can help themselves."

Sharp of her, wasn't it? But it gave me a pang. Agatha says that I might have helped myself to what, perhaps, women value more than men, a material success. That's as may be. But I have often reflected in my serious moments that it would be selfish to "push" myself (as I might have done) ahead of men not so amply provided for as I am. Why should I take bread out of other good fellows' mouths? Still, Ursula seemed to be sharing Agatha's views that I had lagged behind in the general catch-as-catch-can scramble for loaves and fishes.

The child, I could see, was positive that Geoff had cast her out of his heart and mind as a possible wife; and I had an uneasy qualm that this was not altogether agreeable to her, as it should have been. When little —— (better not mention names); when that little minx (whose curl I burnt) coolly transferred her inconsiderable affections from me to another fellow I was furious with the heartless baggage; but I accepted the jilting as a *fait accompli.* I had not the slightest wish to hang on to her in a silly, sentimental, brotherly sort of way. Geoff, under very different circumstances, had accepted *his* " knock " like a sportsman. Obviously, he had presented himself to Ursula as her medical adviser. Probably, too, to wean her mind from morbid thoughts, he had talked about himself—professionally. But I recall vividly that my minx, after collaring the other fellow, had tried to keep a stranglehold on me. It puzzled me at the time. It seemed a rotten thing to do, not playing the game, I mean. Now, to my dismay, there seemed to be something of this unfair grabbing disposition about my own sweet girl. I had that impression. She was evidently thinking of Geoff because she believed that he had ceased to think of her. But I'm no psychologist.

Anyway, she was delightful to me.

I left her certain that Crowhurst was right in his diagnosis or prognosis of her trifling ailment. I had a jolly romp with the children after tea, and when we had exhausted ourselves I talked frocks and frills with them. It had been settled that they were to be bridesmaids. I find this note in my diary, underlined.

Sun blazing again.

It was in total eclipse forty-eight hours later.

III

Crowhurst came to us, seriously alarmed. Ursula had a temperature of 104. That meant little to me, but evidently it had scared him stiff. Geoff rushed off with him, and I spent a miserable hour till the boy came back. Then I saw him, so to speak, in action. He was short with me, curtly incisive, but cool as a cucumber.

" I have the blood, uncle. You can do nothing—*nothing*. A high temperature in these fevers is symptomatic, not necessarily alarming. I must go to work."

He had everything ready in a spare bedroom. He raced away, and I heard him slam the door.

I experienced then all the cruel pangs that must assail a husband, when he is shut out from his wife when her life hangs in the balance, when she is giving her life for another, and that other a speck of humanity, still negligible in its relation to its own father.

I cannot set down what I suffered. Who could? Words cheapen all the tremendous emotions that make or mar us.

Agatha came to me, bless her! She is a wonderful woman at such times, strong and tender. In everyday life, her head rules her heart, which is a disability from a man's point of view; and she never swerves from her standards as, well, as I do. She can't understand somehow that what I say and think upon some subject of current interest on Monday is subject to modifications on Tuesday. Often, by Wednesday, I realise that Monday's judgments were premature and faulty. But Agatha, even when she must know that she is wrong, sticks to her opinions, as Justice Bolt did. It is a Pollen failing that I have purged myself of.

She didn't say much. We sat together, and the cool, firm clasp of her hand upon mine did me a power of good. Mind you, she didn't know yet what Geoff and I knew. It never entered into her head that Ursula was being done to death. But she had seen Crowhurst's face. And to her a temperature of 104 meant more than it did to me. Crowhurst had said that Ursula was delirious.

After an eternity Geoff came in. One look at his face prepared me for the worst.

"It is as I feared," he said. "Not a doubt of it."

He glanced at his mother, and she left the room. She is not curious when great issues are at stake. Geoff stood before me—I can see him now—still cool, but tense, so tense that I felt my own muscles contracting. I found afterwards that my nails had lacerated the palms of my hands.

"It *is* relapsing fever. I have found in the blood-film the typical *spironema.* That settles it. And the other symptoms are there, which I needn't describe to you. But I want to say this, because it is important. I have upstairs three or four temperature charts illustrating the rise and fall in European, Asian and African cases. *They all vary.* You must grasp the fact that we have no chart for the disease which Allen contracted on the upper waters of the Amazon. He has one, no doubt, but how can we get at it?"

I interrupted:

"Oughtn't you to be with Ursula—doing something?"

"She is in no danger whatever, except, possibly, from collapse. I don't anticipate that, because she is about as strong constitutionally as a woman can be. I have time to talk to you, and I must talk to you."

"Go on."

"This scoundrel has infected Ursula with his own disease. Take this comfort, uncle. It didn't kill him, and, by God, it shan't kill her! But I am sure that it is more virulent than the varieties studied by Lorani and others. It kills slowly."

"It kills slowly," I gasped.

"And the commoner forms are astoundingly amenable to treatment."

"God bless you, Geoff."

I dabbed at my forehead, feeling easier, but he went on inexorably:

" This, however, is a very uncommon form. If Allen, with his immense knowledge and experience, was hard put to it to treat himself successfully, what chance have I with Ursula—or even Lorani, if he were accessible? "

I sprang up, on fire with energy and hope.

" We can force Allen to cure her. I say, we can. You tell me that he is the victim of a fixed idea. Granted. He has attempted Ursula's life for reasons which you have made crystal clear to me. He will undo his cursed work for exactly the same reasons. Let him go back to the Amazon and rot in those swamps. Not a moment is to be lost. Come! "

I seized his arm, and felt how rigid it was.

" I knew you would say that, and I'm glad you have said it, but try—try to see this from his angle. He might defy us. From what knowledge I have of him I think he would defy us. In sheer brain power, Uncle Jim, he has us cold. Could we get Ursula out of his hands? She is not fit to be moved. Could we get a warrant for his arrest? I doubt it. Provoke a public scandal, and will that cure Ursula? The experts called in to such a case would contradict each other to such an extent that no prosecuting counsel could hope to get a verdict. He knows all that; he reckons on all that. As things stand to-day, we couldn't prove our case."

He spoke with profound dejection.

"You stand there," said I, "and calmly tell me that nothing can be done?"

"No, but to act too hastily, on the spur of impulse, might be fatal. We'll fight Wilson with his weapons. He regards Crowhurst as an ignoramus. He won't interfere with him. He regards me, possibly, with more alert eyes, but he assumes that I have been called in because I am your nephew. His civility to me just now sickened me. What can an ear and throat man know about relapsing fevers? I tell you we have no convincing evidence yet. We must get evidence."

"How?"

"I don't know—yet. If there is a Power, uncle, who orders the courses of the stars, He will direct me in my course."

He spoke with a dignity and faith that I shall never forget.

IV

Geoff went back to Old Hall, but we had decided that Agatha was not to be told more than she knew already. And as yet Crowhurst had not heard relapsing fevers mentioned. In defiance, I believe, of medical etiquette, Geoff declared that he wouldn't spring upon a worthy fellow a disease with which he had only a nodding acquaintance, because, if he did so, he would have to accuse the squire of the parish of attempted murder.

"There is an exception to all rules, and this is one," said Geoff.

I agreed with him.

Knowing something of general practitioners and their professional jealousies, it was an immense relief to me to hear that Crowhurst, so much older, had frankly recognised and acclaimed Geoff's treatment of baffling symptoms. Geoff, rather cleverly, had told him half the truth. Ursula, so Crowhurst now believed, had been poisoned by a germ-carrying insect. Malaria was indicated. Malaria is common enough in the Essex marshes, but Yeldham is far from the marshes. No doubt Geoff's up-to-date knowledge of malaria impressed a country practitioner. In a word, Crowhurst was "satisfied."

He had reason to be. I couldn't be technical if I tried. But Ursula, according to Geoff, would soon recover from the first relapse. Often, so he told me, it is milder than the onset and seldom lasts so long, but it presents other symptoms. These I will not go into. They were there right enough.

On the following morning Allen had the audacity to call on me. He played his diabolical part; and he fired me to play mine.

"I have hurried down to tell you that Ursula is clear in her mind, but naturally weak. I am glad you called in your clever nephew. I am too personally affected to offer my poor services, and it is many years since I treated these cases. Indeed, I have focused all energies upon diseases unknown in this country. However, I can follow your nephew's treatment with more or less intelligence."

"Thank you. It is a great thing that you are satisfied with Geoff. I am too."

"You must be proud of him."

"I am."

"I see no reason why the date of the wedding should be postponed."

"You relieve me."

My curtness must have tickled his grim humour. It tickled mine to think that he did not know what Geoff had done. Nor did Crowhurst. In emergencies, Geoff can lie as convincingly as I can.

Wilson remained with me for nearly an hour, and I had a glimpse of the cruelty of the beast. He played cat and mouse with me, never forgetting that I might be called as witness *for the defence* in a third trial. For example, he spoke lightly of Ursula's "indisposition"——

Indisposition——!

And then, with malignant intention, he said as lightly:

"But, not forgetting that I was once a general practitioner myself, I guard against a too facile optimism. One never knows, does one."

"You mean——?"

"I mean that blood infection has been a life study with me. I have seen weaklings survive, when the strongest dies. Oddly enough, in my research work among savages, it is often so. I have been left, my dear sir, with a pack of helpless women and children when my sturdy carriers lay dead in camp."

"And you," I asked involuntarily—"weren't you nearly dead yourself, with fear and horror?"

His face hardened. Under his grizzled beard his jaw stuck out.

"We go, Pollen, when our time comes, neither before nor after." With a damnable smile he closed the interview. "Which reminds me that I must go now."

I wondered whether he had any instinct—the premonitory sense of imminent danger given to all famous explorers—which might have warned him that I, James Pollen, intended to kill *him* if—if Ursula died.

Mr. Allen *Chapter XIII*

I

GEOFF told me that relapsing fever was horribly contagious, although there was no danger of his catching it unless some germ-carrier carried it from Ursula to him. But he made it plain that an infested fasting tick would crawl upon any vertebrate animal and poison it instantly. Allen must have brought these minute insects from South America and used them in his experiments with rats and monkeys. I had to inquire after the monkey, and he assured me with his politest smile that it was beginning to sit up and take notice, and that he considered it to be cured.

During the week that followed I got a sort of relapsing fever of my own. My temperature seemed to rise and fall with Ursula's. What Geoff calls the period of *apyrexia*, when the troubles of an enteric character began to undermine Ursula's fine constitution, failed to cool my blood. Crowhurst left the case almost entirely to Geoff; and Geoff went on lying to him and Wilson. Medical etiquette was scrapped. It simply had to be. Without a word to Crowhurst, Geoff dashed up to London in the new car to talk things over with a man called Anstruther, Lorani's head assistant. How much he told him I don't know. To make matters worse, I could see that Geoff was losing confidence in himself. He wouldn't talk with me about the case, but I'm sure he thought, night and day, of nothing else. The strain must have been terrific, and he showed it. Finally, Allen suggested calling in another consultant, Sir Somebody Something, who attended Royalties, and has the credit for being the greatest *accoucheur* of the day. Geoff's nerves, I decided, must be near breaking-point, because he affronted him by replying brutally:

"Why not call in the nearest cow-doctor?"

Allen took no notice of his rudeness, but replied coldly:

"The responsibility is yours, not mine. Please don't forget that, young man."

As Geoff remarked bitterly to me:

"More evidence for the defence."

That the boy was now desperate with anxiety I knew, though he tried to hide it from me. I was not allowed to see Ursula. She sent me messages and tiny notes in pencil. Agatha and the children were miserable. I took the children one afternoon to Allington, where we played hide-and-seek among the sand-dunes, and came back penetrated with sand to the innermost interstices of our clothing, and as miserable as when we started. They hung about me, woeful notes of interrogation.

"Why doesn't Ursula get better?"

What a summer holiday!

Rereading what I have just written, I may have conveyed the impression that Ursula was regarded as dangerously ill by everybody. Not so. That, as Geoff pointed out, was the deadly characteristic of the disease. The attack came on more or less virulently with a sudden rise of temperature; the intermittence followed; with each attack there might be fresh complications exacting special treatment, and further weakening the emaciated body. During these intermittences, the patient might be bright and hopeful, and impart her hopefulness to others. Geoff, after his hurried visit to London, thrust into my hands some marked pamphlets.

"These," he said grimly, "contain Allen's contributions upon relapsing fevers."

I need hardly add that I couldn't make head or tail of them.

" Very technical," admitted Geoff.

Still, he made plain to me that these papers established the writer as a daring and original investigator, and I could see for myself that they were admirably written.

" They are intensely provocative," continued Geoff. " But he doesn't tell us—I mean the profession—the *results* of his researches. He has aroused an immense expectation without satisfying it. That's not against him. Koch, years ago, rushed prematurely into print. Probably Allen is writing a book. The point I must drive home to you is that I can get nothing out of his papers that can help me in treating Ursula. And he declares emphatically that the recognised treatment of the Africa *febris recurrens* is no good for the Upper Amazon variety."

Then the boy left me to my own reflections.

II

Meanwhile I had to dissemble with Allen nearly every day. He called upon me punctiliously ; and when I called at Old Hall he instructed his butler to summon him at once, however busy he might be. Geoff entreated me to be careful, which provoked a retort :

" What about your ill-timed allusion to a cow-doctor ? "

He eyed me ironically.

" Oh ! Uncle Jim——!

" What can you mean ? "

"*I wanted to affront him.* I wanted him to think that I'm an impertinent young jackanapes. A Roland for his Oliver. He, in his own devilish interest, tried to impose upon me one of the bigwigs who knows just about as much as Crowhurst, and could be summoned later on to testify that he had been called in by an anxious father, regardless of expense. Had I consented, he might have suspected me of losing confidence in myself. My impudent answer allayed such suspicions. I—I wonder you didn't give me credit for thinking of that."

" Well, I do now."

Finally, in sheer desperation palsied by my own inactivity, I devised a sort of scheme for getting Ursula out of Old Hall. It might be done at night, or nightfall, during one of the periods of *apyrexia*. I submitted this scheme to Geoff, and it hurt me a little that he laughed at me.

" You saw 'Bulldog Drummond,' uncle, didn't you ? "

I had to own up that I did. And I had read the book. Indeed, throughout this terrible week, I attempted to distract my tormented mind with "shockers." One of our Lord Chancellors, I forget his name, tells us that he could read nothing else in times of great mental perplexity and anxiety. Our hypercritics condemn mercilessly "thrillers" which do at any rate wean harassed folk from futile introspection. Personally, I'm an enthusiastic admirer of Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope, but, I ask you, could any man wander with them down their fragrant, peaceful by-ways if the impending sword of some awful calamity hung by a hair over his head? Certainly not. Let credit be given where credit is due, as Agatha says. The "shockers"—whatever their demerits may be—do shock us out of shocking mental and physical conditions. The homœopathic principle of like curing like.

Geoff said more.

"You know that I've been lying to Allen, hiding from him my treatment. And with his experience, he knows that what he thinks I'm doing is wrong. And yet he nods benevolently to me, and encourages me to continue upon the same lines. No, Uncle Jim, we can't steal Ursula out of Old Hall without provoking a public scandal and imperilling her life. She is safest where she is. Wilson slipped up by administering medicine to his wife. That nearly hanged him. As Allen he is more careful. He never sees Ursula alone; he never touches *her* medicines. Crowhurst, the nurse, and I would have to testify to that. Trust me a little longer."

What could I do?

Nothing.

III

To add to my miseries, I was assailed by a monster who hitherto had left me alone for some twenty years. Jealousy crept upon me. I'm ashamed to set this down. Geoff was fighting tooth and nail to save Ursula's life. He was unremitting in his attentions to her, standing by when I had to stand aloof. She was seeing him each day *at his best*. And I knew what that "best" was, and that she so dependent upon his ministrations, would appreciate him at his true worth. Never, never did I think that he would take advantage of the intimate relations that must establish themselves between doctor and patient. I had no doubt that he remained, as she had said, "the doctor," first, last and all the time. I had also the firmest confidence in her loyalty to me. But—this ground me fine—some sort of comparison between me, her stupid, middle-aged lover, and this young, kind and clever man must be working, like yeast, in her alert, prehensile brain. She had met few men. I recalled tenderly how, when she first met me, she stretched out delicate tentacles seeking something in me that she had not found in, say, Berridge or Crowhurst or other younger men with whom she had danced and played tennis. That first attracted me to her apart from her joy in life, this assaying, so to speak, of character, this happy quest of what is good in others, which brings out the good in them. She would ask me unexpected questions which I was fain to answer honestly, and asking them revealed her own ideals. Jemima has power of extracting grains of gold out of refractory ores. She persists in her processes even when I am refractory.

I decided that jealousy caused relapsing fevers, and was as insidious in provoking kindred diseases. Jealousy made me intensely irritable, as if some suppressed rash had set me a-tingling. I felt a bear, and longed to creep off and hibernate till this ravaging suspense was over. You see, I knew that Geoff could not resist the assaying process, if Ursula regarded him as refractory ore. She would coax the gold out of him when he, probably, was least aware of what she was up to. She had done it with Agatha and the Berridges. She had practised on the Deacons and the pot-boy at "The Cat and Fiddle." She would go on doing it as long as she lived.

Geoff had given me another pamphlet dealing with the life history of certain disgusting germ carriers. That horrible *ornithodorus moubata*—I give its Latin name because the English one revolts me—fasting for four years, and then seeking its "host," infecting that host, reinfecting, too, its own eggs, its own progeny, turning them loose upon other "hosts"——! How can we reconcile these "facts" of Natural Science with our belief in a merciful God? Well, jealousy is an *ornithodorus moubata*.

IV

A contemptible self-pity attacked me at the same time. Why had I been singled out for these scourgings? What had I done to deserve them?

Now I can answer humbly that question. All my life I have been too tolerant of vices I had "no mind to." I enjoy a bottle of sound wine, a decent dinner, and a well-matured cigar—God's good creatures, all of them. But I regarded sots and gluttons with disdain. Drug-fiends aroused all that was worst in me. That self-righteous attitude has crumbled away, because I understand at last what I ought to have known at first—suffering may drive a man into the lowest depths of hell. I could have drunk or drugged myself into oblivion when I saw Geoff's courage and faith slowly diminishing day by day, when I read between the wavering lines of my Ursula's notes to me her ever-increasing weakness and pain.

Perhaps I was becoming hardened under my thwackings. Everybody reaches the stage of despairing acquiescence in conditions they are impotent to control or modify.

And then I had, willy-nilly, to leap out of my Slough of Despond, and out of all consideration of my whining self.

Once more Geoff rushed up to London to consult with Lorani's head assistant. I repeat that Geoff had become "difficult" with me, simply because of my ignorance. When he wasn't in attendance on Ursula he was working in the spare room. He worked indefatigably till the small hours every night. A lot of stuff came down from London, incubating ovens and all that, similar to the paraphernalia in the laboratory at Old Hall. He read every book available dealing with tropical diseases.

When he came back, he told me that another hope had gone by the board. Layman though I am, I had gathered that his treatment of the patient was palliative. She could be cured, if Geoff was able to discover the right anti-toxin. But the poor boy had abandoned hope of that. He was counting, I knew, on Lorani. And Lorani's visit to Italy had been indefinitely prolonged.

And yet he smiled at me, and the quality of his smile puzzled me. He had " got at " something in London. I was enlightened there and then :

" Uncle Jim, Anstruther is coming here to-morrow."

" You have called him in ? "

" No. He is coming to look after me ; he has a sort of general brief to watch the case."

" To look after you," I repeated blankly.

He placed both his thin, finely-shaped hands upon my shoulders, and looked me straight in the eyes.

" I have infected myself with Ursula's disease."

I am fairly robust for my years, but I staggered away from him, convinced that the boy had gone raving mad, and sank helplessly into a chair.

" There's no other way, Uncle Jim ; you gave me the tip."

He spoke so calmly, his friendly eyes looked at me with such grave consideration that the possibility of his insanity vanished.

" I—I ? "

" Yes ; you suggested denouncing him, forcing him to cure Ursula as he has cured that monkey. A good idea, so far as it went. But he could have defied us to prove that Ursula had been infected by some tropical germ-carrier. Anstruther will have just twice the weight of evidence, and he will be able to establish the fact that Ursula and I, exhibiting the same symptoms, are suffering from relapsing fever."

I was dazed. Surely the fact that Ursula had this awful fever was enough. I said as much.

" It's like this, Uncle Jim. If I, a young man, went to Allen with Ursula's blood film, he might refuse to look at it ; he might—probably he would—cut me out of the case altogether and call in some swell, just as he wanted to do before. If I suggested that he should call in Anstruther, he would refuse. What could I do ? Nothing, short of provoking a public inquiry ; and before the thing came into court Ursula might be dead. I've thought this all out, believe me. I call in Anstruther not to attend to Ursula but to me. Anstruther is willing to confront Allen. I have told him everything ; he has read the two trials. Anstruther thinks he can force Allen to hand over the anti-toxin which will save both of us. There was no other way."

" When did you infect yourself ? "

" Two days ago. I injected some of her blood into a vein. I expect to have a splitting headache about this time to-morrow. Crowhurst must be told at once. I have sent for him. I had better see him alone ; it will be less humiliating for him. He will understand, because I can make him understand. He will treat Ursula under Anstruther's directions. Time is the essence of this experiment. Within forty-eight hours, unless I am utterly mistaken, Anstruther and you will go to Old Hall."

V

I shall never know what passed between Crowhurst and Geoff. From time immemorial all doctors (and priests) have hid behind a veil. And wisely. If we—the sheep—could hear what our shepherds say to each other when they are " tiled in," we might lose faith in them. I did what I could. I sent up to the spare room—where Geoff had all his films and charts to show to Crowhurst—a bottle of pre-war whisky and some soda water. I saw that bottle after it came down.

I didn't see Crowhurst, dodging out of his way on purpose. He is a good fellow and a sportsman. Still, it must have been a knock-out blow that Geoff inflicted. Fortunately, most doctors (and priests) contend that ends justify means. And Crowhurst had a sincere affection for Ursula, and a disaffection, quite as strong, for the squire of the parish who had given him a " miss."

Before dinner Geoff told me, with professional secretiveness, which I find so hard to reconcile with the engaging candour of the boy I knew at Rugby and Cambridge, that Crowhurst "understood."

"But, Geoff, what did he say about—*you* ?"

"Nothing much. I'm not the first to experiment on myself. He thinks that as an experiment it may be an eye-opener."

An eye-opener! However, my respect and esteem for the medical profession expanded. They do carry their lives in their hands, wherever they go. Often—I am thinking of the heroes who discovered the good and ill properties of radium—they deliberately sacrifice health and life——

A glorious army of martyrs.

At dinner Geoff actually exhibited high spirits. Poor Agatha smiled approvingly. If she had known! She jumped to the conclusion that Ursula was round the corner, as she put it, with her ineradicable love of a commonplace phrase. She was graciously pleased to hear that a friend of her dear son was coming to spend a few days with us.

"You will play golf," she said.

Next day Anstruther turned up. I was not taken with his appearance. He was not much older than Geoff, but from his talk he might have been Rip van Winkle. And about his talk hung a whiff of carbolic. I felt rather glad that Geoff had abandoned research work, because these young researchers can't get away from the microbes that infest their fellow creatures. Anstruther peered at me as if I were a *spironema*. I almost chuckled thinking that it was a much easier task for me to classify him. He was tall and thin, with a sort of three-storied head. Geoff said that he had a one-twelfth oil-immersion lens of an eye. At this quip Anstruther deigned to smile. This provoked another sally :

" He is a walking incubating oven, Uncle Jim."

However, we found a link between us. Anstruther collected postage stamps, and I'm prepared to lay a thousand to three that he could detect fraudulent issues quicker than any professional philatelist. I had collected postage stamps, much to Agatha's annoyance, but when I sold my modest collection for about twice what I paid for it she was quite pleased with me.

Alone with me I expected from our guest some sort of tribute to Geoff, but he said coolly :

" Willing has guts."

I particularly dislike this expression, and so does Agatha, but it seems to be coming into common use. I have heard it from young ladies (so-called). Anstruther grinned. He has a mouth like a rat-trap, but when he opens it you see two rows of good teeth. I had a pleasing vision of his getting those teeth into Allen.

" Yes. Willing has the courage of his convictions."

That was all. Anstruther obviously wanted to talk to me about Allen, or rather about Wilson, in whom this skilled microscopist seemed to have discovered some new and appalling bacillus.

" He has, of course, tramp fever. From what your nephew tells me, that has always been the driving force behind his actions. I looked up his record yesterday."

"The police record?"

He replied contemptuously: "I don't waste my time. No; I looked him up as a doctor. Degrees mean little to me, Mr. Pollen. Some of the biggest asses in our profession have half the alphabet after their names. I called upon an old boy who remembered Wilson when he was a student in Edinburgh; and I stumbled upon an interesting bit of information. He was the natural son of Iremonger. You have heard of Iremonger?"

I was tempted to nod, but I didn't.

"No. An odd name."

"And an odd fellow. Iremonger, a cadet of a good family, would have ranked, had he lived, with Burton. But he died, a comparatively young man, in East Africa. Iremonger had an Edinburgh degree, not too easy to get, but he chucked medicine and took to elephant hunting, and from that to exploration. Wilson's mother was the daughter of some Edinburgh lodging-house keeper. She must have been no ordinary woman, because she educated and supported Wilson for twenty years, possibly with some financial assistance from Iremonger. No secret was made of Wilson's parentage. The boy himself was proud of being Iremonger's son. Now comes the tit-bit—Wilson was known in those student days as 'Mad Wilson' and 'Beau Wilson.' He made a record for himself as a bold and daring scapegrace, and he made Edinburgh too hot to hold him after he took his degree. My old boy tells me that he was regarded by the authorities as *the* man of his year, the brainiest of a brainy lot. He shipped as doctor in some ship bound for West Africa ; and my old friend lost sight of him till he came before the public notice as the prisoner in the big murder trial. How and when he got his Paris degree I don't know."

This information about Wilson's earlier life lifted a small fog. I had never understood why " Mr. Allen " kept up an establishment and all that goes with it. Particularly if pressed for money, as he admitted to me that he was. Well, the son of Iremonger liked to pose as a country gentleman ; his youthful imagination, soaring above a lodging-house, had been fired by the amenities of country house life. To secure those amenities he had wooed and won Mrs. Venner. Then, perhaps, he found himself dependent on a rich wife, had to take second place in a house not his own, and was increasingly irked in his cold and monstrous selfishness by having her always with him to interfere with his research work and that insistent call of the wild which was in his blood. He had found sanctuary at Old Hall, and the fact that he lived as his well-to-do neighbours lived made it easier for him to keep them at a distance. Park palings kept out much, including curiosity.

Anstruther confounded me before he left me to join Geoff. He said casually :

"I may be here on a goose chase. We know nothing."

"You—*you* tell me you know nothing!"

Again he grinned at me, just as I grin at Jemima when she plays the fool.

"Lorani says he knows nothing."

"Well, I'm damned!"

"I often damn myself, Mr. Pollen, because after months of patient work I find that I have travelled round and round in a vicious circle. That is why original research is so fascinating and so wholesome a discipline. The big men will tell you that the very little we do know dwindles into a negligible quantity when compared with what we don't know. All of us touch the fringe of knowledge, and struggle helplessly to get beyond it, but the beyond is illimitable. Willing is trying an experiment. He may, or may not, exhibit the symptoms of *febris recurrens*. If he does, I grant you we have evidence that might, or again might not, put Wilson in the dock once more. But I ask you this: can we be sure that he has cured that monkey and himself?"

He left me with that cud to chew.

VI

The screw was turning with a remorseless pressure that began to threaten my reason. As it was a warm still afternoon I got Deacon to carry a chaiselongue into the garden to a shady nook where I should be undisturbed by the children. He was solicitous in helping me to find the right spot and in fixing me up comfortably with a cushion or two. Since it was my pleasure to sit by myself in the open it was his desire for the moment to make the undertaking a success. I thought, as he fussed about me, how surprised he would be if he knew how small a part thoughts of comfort played in my mind just then, although I must confess that they were not wholly absent.

When the old chap had left me with the certainty that intrusion would be kept from me until I was ready to face the family tea-table, the peace and beauty of my surroundings stole upon my troubled spirit and gave me real comfort, always a mental attribute.

I had brought out a book, a "shocker," chiefly to stabilise in Deacon's mind the impression that I must be left alone. I opened it idly from mere force of habit and tried to read a line or two. I had to hurl it from me.

To the left I could see the orchard, where Ursula had lifted her wet little face to mine. And I had thought then that all our troubles were over. I could see in the mid-distance the chimneys of Old Hall, where she was lying, a mere wraith of her former self. And in this dear old Mote Farm, Geoff, upon whom I had focused all my hopes and ambitions, was wondering whether a splitting headache was coming to him, and with it the deadly nausea and the sharp rise of temperature.

My own head split at the thought of that brave boy, risking his life, in my interests.

My interests?

Anstruther was right. We know nothing, not even about ourselves. We touch the fringe of our emotions, and stand back appalled at the dark void beyond them.

Was Geoff risking his life to save the life of the woman he still loved?

I touched that fringe and dared not peer beyond it.

VII

I was disturbed by Matilda, who told me that Jemima had been sent to her room in disgrace.

"She's jolly well ashamed of herself," added my niece. "I went to Geoff's room where he works and he told me to do a bunk. Mummy is at the Vicarage. Deacon told me where *you* were and that I was on no account to disturb you. But I told him that I couldn't disturb you if I tried."

Really I was glad to see the little elf. She has such a whimsical phizz, and an eye and an ear cocked for anything that tickles her fancy. Her lankiness, too, is attractive, though a secret grief to her. However, I tell her she will grow out of it. Agatha was not prepossessing at her age, all spindle legs. To-day my sister's underpinning is a solid dissatisfaction to her; and I remember how testy she was with me when I merely remarked that short skirts and silk stockings to certain people might be more fashionable than becoming.

Matilda sat down uninvited by my side.

" How is Ursula, Uncle Jim ? "

" Not quite so well."

" Oh, dear ! God can't want Ursula more than we do, can He ? "

I have had to deal with such questions from Matilda ever since she could ask them.

" Tch ! " said I. " Your dear mother would tell you that God's ways are not our ways."

" Why shouldn't they be ? "

" You had better ask your mother, or Mr. Berridge."

" I think I'll ask Mr. Berridge."

I felt sorry for Berridge, but I didn't say so. To make things easier for myself I asked what Jemima had done.

" Jimmie is full of original sin. I—I don't like to tell you what she's done."

" Then don't tell me. I suppose I'm a person of too much importance to ask any insignificant girl to tell me something she doesn't want to."

" But I do want to—really."

Jemima, it appeared, had perpetrated a joke that affected my pocket ; hence Matilda's reluctance to tell me about it. I inherited from Uncle Augustus a marble bust of that great man, taken when he was Lord Mayor. Agatha owns a replica in plaster. She brought this replica to Mote Farm, much to my amusement, and placed it on a pedestal in a small alcove in the hall, between the door leading into the dining-room and the door that leads to the pantry. Any visitor can see this bust as soon as ushered into the hall. When I remonstrated with Agatha for bringing this plaster cast to Mote Farm, she said loftily : " I am very proud of Uncle Augustus, but I'm the last woman in the world to lug him into conversation. Still, if a visitor notices the cast, and asks me a very natural question, I as naturally answer it." I was aware that Nuncle's formidable nose annoyed Jemima, because Agatha had to reprove her for flinging grapes at it and raspberries (which left a stain). It seems that while I was talking to Anstruther, Jemima had hung my moter coat upon Nuncle's shoulders. She had found in the pocket of the coat my goggles, which she balanced carefully upon the offending nose. With burnt cork she added to the clean-shaven majestic countenance a pair of moustachios and a superb imperial. Then she crowned my august relative with Agatha's garden hat (of the mushroom variety affected, I believe, by the Great White Queen), and hid behind the pedestal to watch the effect on any casual passer-by. I fear me that she had in mind her mother. But, unfortunately, old Deacon, carrying a tray of wine glasses, appeared suddenly from the pantry, and was so staggered at the sight of an unseemly stranger in my hall that he slipped and dropped the tray. Matilda concluded mournfully :

" Mummy says it will cost you a pound, Uncle Jim, unless Jemima pays for the damage out of her weekly allowance."

I think I have mentioned that her weekly allowance is sixpence.

" Jemima is heavily in debt to me," added Matilda. " You'll have to wait for your money, dearest. Do you mind very much ? "

" But Deacon was with me not half an hour ago. Why didn't he mention this breakage ? "

" Because Jemima and I made him take his dying sam that he wouldn't."

I felt it to be my duty to see Jemima at once ; and Matilda followed me meekly (for her) into the house.

VIII

I was coming out of the children's room, feeling slightly happier because Jemima was smiling again, when I perceived Anstruther standing outside Geoff's door. His face looked more woodeny than ever. He gave me a sign, which I took to mean that he wished to speak to me alone. I accompanied him into his bedroom across the landing and shut the door.

He spoke in his mechanical voice, betraying no emotion at all.

" Your nephew's temperature is rising rapidly, and other confirmatory symptoms are developing. I propose to examine his blood immediately."

I

THESE things seem to be done nowadays very quickly. If my memory serves me faithfully—which it doesn't—only an hour or two elapsed before Anstruther was showing me two photographs to which he attached great importance. But it might have been the next morning. I was so dithered that I made no entries in my diary, not even a note upon the back of an envelope.

Anstruther, unlike Geoff, did not spare me the intimidating terminology of bacteriologists. I didn't know whether to take it as a compliment or not that he talked to me as he talked to Geoff, expecting me, of course, to follow him, which I did haltingly.

These photographs had been taken with the camera which can be attached to Geoff's microscope. Number one showed the *spironemæ*—I have got this word right—in Ursula's blood, magnified enormously. I can only say that they looked like eels to me. Number two exhibited the same sort of eels. Even to the untrained eye it was convincing that two photographs had been taken of the same family of wrigglers. But photograph number two was Geoff's blood film. At the back of each were notes in Geoff's and Anstruther's handwriting. These notes were too technical for me. Briefly, they recorded the date when each photograph was taken, and the conditions: temperature of the patient, and so forth.

Anstruther was very patient with me, and I began to feel a liking for him, which warmed into attachment later on. Before we tackled Wilson it was necessary—as he pointed out to me—that I should understand thoroughly the nature of the evidence with which we proposed to confound him.

" These photographs," said Anstruther, " establish the fact that both patients are suffering from the same form of relapsing fever."

He used the Latin name, but I shall avoid doing so as much as I can. He had got as far as this, when he bolted, bringing back a bulky volume on tropical diseases. He then showed me a coloured plate, not very dissimilar to our photographs, and went on rather too quickly for me: " This shows the *spironemæ* in the Congo variety of the disease. You will note that they are slightly different."

I had to nod, although I couldn't see much difference.

" The common name of the fever is ' tick fever.' Ticks carry the disease, but your nephew has already explained all that to you. It is humanly certain that Wilson infected Miss Ursula with a tick. If we could find those ticks in his possession——!"

" Why not ? "

" Hopeless sort of job, Mr. Pollen. Your nephew infected himself with Miss Ursula's blood, and it is possible that in his case the onset of the disease was more virulent in character on that account."

I remember now that this talk took place the next morning. I remember, because at breakfast Anstruther and I had to do some easy lying, so as not to alarm Agatha and the children. Anstruther said with a professional finality which forbade questions that Geoff had been overworking himself and was taking a much needed rest in bed. Agatha accepted this with pious resignation and forthwith instructed Matilda and Jemima not to disturb their dear brother. I had seen Geoff myself, and—however incredible it may appear—he laughed and joked with me as if nothing was the matter. But he looked pulled and drawn, because the headache and nausea had been severe. Anstruther, standing beside Geoff's bed, said calmly:

" He will be able to show up as usual later on."

I return to my talk after breakfast with Lorani's prime minister. *I thought of him as that.* Indeed Geoff had remarked to me: " Anstruther does the spade work, Uncle Jim. And Lorani reaps the harvest. But Anstruther's turn will come."

" With these photographs, Mr. Pollen, we shall down our man."

" How? "

Anstruther displayed impatience.

" Good God! Can't you see? What has happened? Miss Ursula comes down with a fever; it might be any fever; there are dozens of fevers.

The ordinary country practitioner wouldn't have a notion that it was some obscure form of tropical disease. How could he? Luckily for Miss Ursula your nephew does know a bit. He puts a drop of his patient's blood under his microscope; he takes a photograph; and the photograph exhibits the typical *spirilla* of relapsing fever. How did she get it. It is not contagious except by a germ carrier——"

"Geoff has made all that perfectly plain."

"Then what's bothering you, Mr. Pollen."

"Why should the two photographs down Wilson?"

I was stupid, I know, but think of what I had gone through. My mind seemed incapable of functioning properly.

"I thrust these two photographs into his hand. Coming from me he can attempt no bluff. I establish the fact that Miss Ursula and Willing are suffering from the same form of *febris recurrens*; and I remind him that he has told the world that he alone can cure this South American variant. I demand the anti-toxin. Can he refuse to give it to us?"

"If he won't?"

"If he won't, there's little hope for either of them."

He said this decisively, but with no more emphasis than he had used before. For the first time I realised fully what we were up against, and the shock of it made my brain reel. This man who had compassed the death of his wife held Ursula's life in the palm of his hand. And Geoff's. Both these splendid young people, both dear to me, and one dearer than any other, were at his mercy. We had to force him to give us what we wanted, but could we do it?

"What other weapons have we?" I asked. "We can expose him as Wilson——"

"And delay his going back to the Amazon. I'm relying on that. Fight he will, be sure of that, and to a finish. We shall win through."

His assurance had its effect on me.

"When do you propose to confront this devil?"

"Why now. There's no time to be lost. The remedy must be administered as soon as we can get it. If it's the right stuff, the effect is magical, almost instantaneous."

"You mean that it can't fail?"

"I do if it's the right stuff."

My brain began to work again.

"If it's the right stuff," I repeated, "why shouldn't he hand over some faked remedy, and then escape out of the country?"

Anstruther hardly noticed this.

"We'll get it out of him," he growled. "And its effect will be sure, as I have told you. Willing will be up and about in two days and ready for work at the end of a week. Miss Ursula is now suffering from other troubles induced by the disease, the troubles that would kill her in the long run, if she wasn't treated. It may take some weeks for her to be her old self, but you needn't have any fear about her ultimate recovery."

He returned suddenly to the question I had asked :

" You talk of escape——! How can he escape ? He has one of two alternatives ; he can surrender unconditionally and hand over his anti-toxin, and, by God, I'll make him !—or he can order us out of his house and defy us to do our worst. If he bolts he admits his guilt."

Anstruther was spoiling for a fight. His jaw stuck out ; his fists were clenched ; the light of battle gleamed in his eyes.

II

We walked slowly up to Old Hall, more slowly than suited me ; but Anstruther, now that he was approaching the crisis, appeared to be as deliberate as if he were going to pay a morning call, gathering himself together, I presume, for what was to come.

We agreed upon our plan.

Anstruther had thought of everything ; and it humbled me to reflect how much it would depend upon him and how little upon me. But what did I care about that, if my dear ones were to be saved ? I hadn't even seen all the pitfalls ; but he had. He reminded me that Allen would instantly be put upon his guard at the first mention of the name Anstruther.

" He knows all about me and my work," he said, with a faint smile.

" So much the better," said I.

" Um ! He may think that I'm after his secret discovery."

And then to my surprise, he blurted our vehemently :

" And I am. If I could collar his notes, his plates, his blood films and his formulæ I—I would give ten years of my life."

I suppose I stared at him incredulously, for he glanced back at me, with as near to a smile as ever showed upon his face.

I shall never understand some of my fellow-men.

However, he may have guessed what was passing in my mind, for he stood still and held out his hand.

I gripped it.

We were shown into the drawing-room, and I knew Wilson would join us, but I didn't mention to the butler Anstruther's name.

Wilson came in, wearing his long white coat. In spite of myself I was shaken at the sight of him, which caused me to slur over the introduction to Anstruther. He could not have caught his name but his eyes rested for a moment upon the dome-shaped head. He said in his politest tones :

" Ursula's condition remains much the same."

It had been settled that I was to open the attack, and I did so with this carefully prepared sentence :

" You are satisfied, Mr. Allen ? "

He replied lightly :

"Your nephew is a clever young fellow, and Crowhurst"—he glanced at Anstruther, as much as to say: "Why the devil have you brought this man here?"—"Crowhurst seems to think that all that is possible is being done. These fevers are difficult to deal with. Nobody knows that better than I do."

"I am not satisfied, Mr. Allen."

"No? Ah, well, that is natural enough——" He smiled at me.

I delivered the first punch.

"I don't think you heard my friend's name. He is Mr. Anstruther, Mr. Mark Anstruther."

Just a flicker of the eyelids showed that the punch had gone home.

"I have heard of Mr. Mark Anstruther," he said. "I—I am glad to meet him."

There was a pause.

"Mr. Anstruther is a friend of my nephew's," I said.

"Indeed. Now I understand what puzzled me. You suggested calling in Lorani. You have heard of Lorani from your nephew?"

"Yes."

"I made no objection to Lorani, but—if I may say so before the accomplished gentleman who shares his labours—Lorani is the *last* man I should call in myself, to treat a case of marsh fever, common enough in this neighbourhood."

Here I made a slip. The sneering beast provoked me.

" I can quite believe that Lorani is the last man you would call in," I said.

A frown flitted across Anstruther's face. I was only to make the openings. It was for him to engage. He said quickly :

" But surely, Mr. Allen, you will admit that Lorani knows something about marsh fevers ? "

" Of course I admit that ; and so do I. But we are specialists. Why call in a specialist ? "

I delivered the second punch.

" My nephew, I am sorry to say, is in bed, and unable to attend to his patient."

When he turned to me it was always as if from me at least he had little to fear.

" Is that why you have brought Mr. Anstruther here to take his place, without asking for my permission ? " he asked, half contemptuously.

" No. Mr. Anstruther is in Yeldham to attend to my nephew and to make careful notes of his case. Mr. Anstruther will tell you what is the matter with him."

" The matter with him ? " he sneered. " Really, Mr. Pollen, I am distressed to hear that your nephew is ill, but——"

At this point Anstruther took charge, and I dropped back. A duel to the finish was about to take place between these two men, and I could only look on. I think, I'm not sure, that Wilson knew what he was in for. Possibly, too, he had fortified himself against attack. That is Anstruther's opinion. But if Anstruther is right in this, it is quite certain that Wilson expected me to do the fighting. He couldn't have been prepared for Anstruther, whom he had never met, and whom he must have known as the one man in England whom he would rather not meet upon such an issue.

Anstruther held up his hand, a preconcerted signal.

"My friend, Mr. Geoffrey Willing, is attacked by *febris recurrens*, Mr. Allen, and it may interest you to know that it is not the African or Asian form of the disease."

III

I pause here for a moment to say something about my feelings for Wilson. I regarded him with such horror and detestation that I had sworn, as you know, to kill him, if Ursula died. I have never bargained, as some do, with Omnipotence. I have never formulated a sort of prayer to this effect: "Give me my heart's desire, and I'll pay the price You choose to ask." I had done it, of course, as a child, and some of us, in our attitude towards Omnipotence, remain children all our lives. But I, soon after I left Cambridge, pieced together my own creed, which has served me well enough: "Do what good you can do here, and it will be well with you hereafter. Trust the Supreme Power, whom neither you nor any finite mind can understand." This served me till I came to Yeldham, up to the moment when I identified " Mr. Allen " as Dr. Wilson. And then this arch-fiend's escape from justice, when morally speaking, I knew that he was forger and murderer, his immunity from consequences, his success, his hardly disguised disdain of others, and finally his diabolical attempt to rid himself of Ursula—these, cumulatively, had shattered my faith. So far as the law of the land went, even Geoffrey believed that he might escape once more. But not from me, the man he regarded as an amiable fool. I make no apology for setting down my feelings towards Wilson. I regret only my inability to express them more strongly.

Wilson—and even I had to admire his consummate self-control—said quietly :

" You do interest me. *Febris recurrens*, you say ? "

" But not in any form familiar to me, or to the investigators whom I know."

" But how—how can he possibly have contracted such a disease ? "

There was a slight pause before Anstruther said :

" He took some of his patient's blood and injected it into his own arm."

He couldn't have expected that, but he betrayed neither surprise nor incredulity. He said as calmly as before, but still with the same slight sneer :

" Am I to infer that my daughter," he emphasised the personal pronoun, "is also suffering from *febris recurrens*, a disease which I know more about than Lorani or you, a disease which attacked me, which almost killed me, and that I—I, living in this house, meeting her medical attendants every day, was not informed of it?"

"I don't care what you infer," said Anstruther, on the same note of contempt that Allen had used towards me.

That did touch him. There was a flush in his parchment skin as he said: "Mr. Anstruther, I will ask you to leave my house, and to take Mr. Pollen with you. My time is of some value; I can't waste it talking nonsense."

There was a curious smouldering resentment in his husky voice and in his deeply-set eyes. As Anstruther stood still, saying nothing, he went on:

"My daughter, Miss Allen——"

Anstruther interrupted.

"You mean your stepdaughter, Miss Venner——"

He laughed.

IV

I was utterly at a loss to account for that laugh. Really, he imposed upon me for the second time the conviction that we had made some ridiculous blunder, that the man was not Wilson after all. It crossed my mind that he might have attended Wilson, and after his death undertaken the care of Ursula. His laugh, a sort of hearty laugh at us, not exactly defiant or derisive, a ringing peal, disintegrated me. Then he suddenly became calm.

"A rehearsed scene this, eh?"

"Rehearsed?" repeated Anstruther. "Yes, Dr. Wilson."

He laughed again.

"You are sure that I am Dr. Wilson?"

"Just as sure as I am that Miss Allen is Miss Venner."

"Really? I had, perhaps, better refer you two amateur actors to my stage-manager, my solicitor."

I countered this.

"Your solicitor, Mr. Ramstock, evidently knows that you are Wilson; otherwise you would not refer us to him."

He ignored my interruption, but he heard it.

Anstruther's cold voice seemed to drip upon the silence.

"The law moves slowly, sir, and we, like you, have no time to waste. The law, with its interminable delays, involving in this case identification, might keep you indefinitely in England. We—all of us—would hasten, if we can, your departure to another country, where Mr. Allen's work as a saviour of human lives will not be interfered with."

Allen, by this time half-way to the chimney-piece, to pull the old-fashioned bell, turned, arrested as I was by the smooth suavity of Anstruther's tones.

"You see we have come prepared. Are you

sufficiently interested in these two photographs to look at them and then read the notes on the back of each ? "

Anstruther held them out gravely. Allen hesitated before he snatched them from the long thin hand. He was not thinking, I am sure, either of himself or Ursula ; he was engrossed with plates which he might have prepared himself. He took them in hungrily.

" The typical *spironemæ* are not very dissimilar, are they ? " asked Anstruther.

Greek answered Greek.

" What can these tell *you* ? Nothing."

He handed them back, and turned again towards the bell.

" They tell me this," said Anstruther, " that they are slightly different from the African and Asian *spirilla*."

" Well, what of it ? "

" When they were submitted to a jury they would establish the fact that Dr. Crowhurst's patient contracted somehow this tropical disease ; and curiosity would be stimulated as to when and where and why she got it. Mr. Lorani or I might be able to satisfy that curiosity. Bearing in mind the conflicting testimony of other experts who might be called in it is true we might not, because I know as well as you do that nothing is certain in this uncertain world except—death."

I decided that Anstruther, as far as power and place are concerned in this uncertain world, was wasting his time fussing with a microscope. He ought to have been at the Criminal Bar. The word " death " was an Old Bailey touch.

Allen sat down, the first sign of a possible surrender. One yellow claw rested upon the arm of his chair; the other pulled at his grizzled beard. Looking at him, if he was Wilson, it was difficult to believe that he had ever been called " Beau."

He raised his head.

" I admit nothing," he rapped out. But, as his eyes dropped again, he said in a low voice—hardly as if he were speaking to us: " I want to go back; I must go back."

Anstruther is a marvel. It is to Geoff's credit that he should have such a friend. And yet there is something uncanny about this young man's methods. I know now that he hadn't rehearsed what followed. It was just inspiration falling upon an intelligence able to achieve supreme detachment. Geoff had agreed with me that Dr. Wilson must be denounced, threatened, and forced at pistol point to accept our terms.

But a man of Anstruther's quality doesn't go to work in that obvious way.

" May I reconstruct this case, Mr. Allen ? "

I may have been mistaken, but I thought that Allen stiffened himself for attack. Anstruther went on :

" Dr. Wilson, as you may remember, was acquitted on two charges many years ago. If it could be shown that since his disappearance he had made a new name for himself, a name acclaimed by all the men who are working on original research lines; if it could be shown, also, that he had discovered a new anti-toxin which will save thousands of lives; if, in fine, it was made plain that any stigma attaching itself to Dr. Wilson had been wiped out by all that he has done since as Mr. Allen——"

He paused for an instant, glancing at Allen. But he was lying back in his chair, with half-closed eyes, listening intently. I expected him to jump up, and rap out again: "I don't admit that." He didn't. Anstruther continued:

"Why then a very lively sympathy for Dr. Wilson would be aroused. If it could be further shown that Dr. Wilson was very anxious to go back to the Amazon everybody would wish him 'God-speed.' Mr. Allen, so he has told us in his pamphlets, brought with him from the Amazon the particular insects that carry the germs of *febris recurrens*. He is absorbed in his research work; one of these insects escapes—he was careless as we all are—and it infects a young lady. The onset of the disease hardly excites Mr. Allen's notice. Headache—nausea—a temperature. Mr. Allen sends for the local doctor who has attended the young lady before. He raises no objections to a consultant who is called in. In short, he washes his busy hands of the whole affair. And then——"

He paused again, waiting possibly for further inspiration. Allen, now bolt upright in his chair, exclaimed sharply :

" Yes. And then ? "

" Why then," continued Anstruther, with no ironical inflection in his voice, " Mr. Allen discovers to his horror that the young lady has the disease which he alone can treat to a successful issue. He places his anti-toxin in the hands of the doctor in attendance with instructions how to administer it."

" And if he doesn't ? "

" If he doesn't, if he withholds the sovereign remedy that he claims to have discovered, the inference would be either that he had no such remedy and had gulled his own scientific public, or——"

" Or—— ? "

" Or that this young lady was regarded by him with such inhuman indifference that he didn't care whether she lived or died. Still, I venture to assume that under such circumstances Mr. Allen would hand over the anti-toxin, and his identity with Dr. Wilson would remain, as naturally he would wish it to remain, a secret."

I thought we had him. How little I knew the character of the man. He replied coldly :

" There is a third alternative, Mr. Anstruther, and one which you as a specialist in tropical diseases will recognise as valid. I have experimented on rats, on monkeys, and on myself. But I have not given my formulæ to the scientific world.

Why? Because in my opinion I am not yet prepared to experiment with human beings. My own case was desperate. What I have done to myself, with all the attendant risks, I might well hesitate to do to one near and dear to me."

Yes; it might look like that to a jury. How should anyone believe that the words "near and dear to me," used of the girl who he only wanted to brush out of his path, were a foul insult. He would be protected by his very ruthlessness.

But Anstruther went on as quietly as before:

"I have presented, very inadequately, the case for the defence. May I point out what might be said by the other side?" Without waiting for a reply, he continued:

"It can be shown that the young lady who is known as Miss Allen is really Miss Venner."

"How?"

"It is hardly necessary to say 'how.' It is so; and we have our proofs. You, of course, would be called upon to establish the fact that you are Allen, a born and bred Allen. Possibly you are prepared to do this. But it is something of a coincidence that Wilson disappeared for at least a year after he was acquitted. At the end of that year Mr. Allen buys the Yeldham Old Hall property. He leaves Miss Venner—for the purposes of my argument you will allow me to assume that we know she is Miss Venner—with the village parson and disappears again. He becomes known as an explorer and a bacteriologist. Another coincidence.

Dr, Wilson was the son of a noted explorer, and also a bacteriologist. And Dr. Wilson wished to return to Africa, as was shown at the second trial. Mr. Allen, if he can make plain to a jury that he is Mr. Allen, would then have to explain his financial position, and also how it came to pass that he was acting as guardian to Miss Allen, and why he presented her to this neighbourhood as Miss Allen. Mr. Allen might be asked why he has persistently refused to meet other men engaged in research work, and why he has refused to appear before the Geographical Society. All these questions might delay Mr. Allen's return to South America. Now I put it to him, disdaining to use threats to a man of such intelligence, would it not be wiser to place this anti-toxin in my hands, and to entrust me with the responsibility of trying it first upon Mr. Geoffrey Willing, who is ready, unhesitatingly, to accept all risks? If it succeeds with him, we can then try it upon the young lady, with less risk. Mr. Allen returns to the Amazon when he pleases, and the vexed question of his possible identity with the unfortunate Dr. Wilson is not raised."

Allen sat thinking; presently he said calmly:

"My congratulations, Mr. Anstruther. You have left out, however, in presenting the case for the defence, something of vital importance. It would be fatuous to pretend not to understand you. Mr. Pollen and you—however cleverly you may disguise it—are threatening me. Granting, as you put it for the sake of argument, that I—whether I am Wilson or not—am charged with a capital crime, let us call it murder and have done with it, what motive could be assigned to justify such a monstrous charge ? "

" Ah ! The motive——"

" Yes—the motive ? "

He leaned forward ; for the first time he betrayed excitement.

" It might be shown," said Anstruther, more quietly than ever, " that there was an overwhelming motive. Under the terms of Mrs. Wilson's will, the sum of fifteen thousand pounds has to be paid over to Miss Venner upon her marriage or when she becomes twenty-one. If it could be shown that Dr. Wilson was in pressing need of money, if his property happened to be heavily mortgaged, if this fifteen thousand pounds was imperatively needed to equip some great expedition, and if, lastly, under the terms of the will, Dr. Wilson would inherit the fifteen thousand pounds upon the death of Miss Venner, why then, I fancy, the motive for murder or attempted murder would not be absent."

V

The fight was over and we had won.

Wilson stood up, facing Anstruther. Loathing him as I did I couldn't deny him dignity. He bowed courteously But, when he spoke, all that was most hateful in the man found expression because he didn't express it in words. Evil oozed from him, a sort of icy malignity.

"I understand you, Mr. Anstruther, and you understand me. If you will come with me to my laboratory, I will give you the anti-toxin, and full directions how to use it. I should prefer, under the circumstances, not to administer it myself. But, before I do this," he paused, turning to me, "I should like to hear from this worthy gentleman what assurances 'Mr. Allen' has that he will not find himself denounced as Dr. Wilson."

"You will have this assurance," said I. "I love Ursula. I would sacrifice—well, let us say—fifteen thousand pounds to keep her what she is, a sweet joyous creature, shrinking from evil because she has never touched evil."

An odious grin appeared upon his face.

"Such high-souled rectitude is the best assurance I could have," he sneered. "Come, Mr. Anstruther."

He might sneer as much as he liked now we had broken him. That horrible laboratory—he was going to take Anstruther into it alone! Instinctively I moved towards him. Allen, as sharp as a needle, understood the meaning of the movement.

"Pray don't be alarmed," he said, as if he were calming a child. "Mr. Anstruther will tell you that he is well able to take care of himself."

"Oh, of course," said Anstruther.

" Besides, you will be here, you know, to call in the police if we don't come back within five minutes."

And with that they went out, leaving me to my thoughts.

I sat in the silent room, looking out on to the garden, so quiet and beautiful in the September sunshine. I felt no triumph at that moment, but only a little sad that I had been able to do so little, though I had been prepared to do so much. Still I felt no jealousy of the younger man who had done it all. His quick brain, his quick wits, had saved two precious lives. And his youth had served him. Age may be willing and experienced, but it is slow. My chief feeling was one of deep gratitude to this young man.

After some time they came back. Wilson surveyed me paternally :

" Go home and lie down, Pollen. It will do you good."

He rang the bell as he spoke.

" Thank you, I will."

As I moved towards the door, he called me sharply :

" Pollen——"

" Yes ? "

" Let us leave prophecy to the politicians. But I think I can say this to you—your wedding will take place reasonably soon, unless——"

" Unless—— ? "

" Unless a young girl changes her mind. They do sometimes."

I

This Parthian shot whistled into my head rather than my heart. It was further confirmation of the man's malignity. I couldn't reply to him, because the door opened and the smug butler presented his impassive face.

"Yes, sir——?"

"Take this gentleman, Mr. Mark Anstruther, to Miss Allen's room. He will speak to the nurse first."

"Very good, sir."

The three of us—the manservant, Anstruther, and myself—found ourselves in the main hall. The butler went slowly up the fine staircase. I clutched at Anstruther's arm. Without a word from me, he guessed what was tearing me.

"I promised your Geoff, Mr. Pollen, to administer the anti-toxin to him *first.* I want, however, to see Miss Ursula, and—and do a little more lying."

We followed the butler up the staircase, and I slipped through the open front door and on to the big gravelled space in front of it, intending to wait for Anstruther.

The gardens were upon the other side of the house, and so of course was the laboratory. I glanced at my watch. An hour had passed. What an hour! I admit that I felt limp, noticeably weakened by what I had gone through. And I wondered whether Anstruther was feeling the same over-strain. Probably not. He was young and resiliently strong. His calm strength would pass somehow into little Ursula's weakened body. This comforted me, as I sat down under a big chestnut tree.

Suddenly I saw Wilson approaching me. I stood up. We were quite alone, perhaps sixty yards from the gravelled sweep.

"You are waiting for your young friend," he said.

"Yes."

"You are lucky to have such a friend."

"I am."

"He understands me; you don't; you never will; you couldn't. You are swayed by a thousand impulses, some good, some bad, some indifferent. I am swayed by nothing, nothing except my will. There is no witness here now. The blinds between us are up."

He spoke almost pleasantly, which misled me.

"Tell me, Pollen—I am curious on that point only—how did you, *you* find out that I am Wilson?"

His scarcely veiled contempt of me stung me into retaliating sharply:

"Ah! How did I? If I answer that question, Dr. Wilson, will you tell me how you found out that I did find out?"

With time and thought I might have expressed myself less colloquially.

He said curtly:

"Answer my question and I will answer yours."

"Done! I found a name upon a slip of paper at the back of that beautiful miniature which you gave Ursula. I detected a family likeness and said so. Ursula slipped the miniature into my hand upon the first night we dined here. My nephew took it from its frame. We found a name—Ursula Venner. The rest followed automatically."

He was tremendously affected, so much so that I anticipated an outbreak of violence. And it came, but not immediately. He answered my question first:

"You gave yourself away to Ramstock; he wrote to me that night. Your sister, Mrs. Willing, who is as simple to deal with as you are, tumbled into a little verbal trap that I prepared for her."

Our last talk together should have ended there. I make no doubt that Anstruther or even Geoff would have resisted the temptation to exacerbate a man in his over-strung condition. But, damn it, I'm human. And he had drawled out his answer with such chilling disdain of poor Agatha.

I said as chillingly:

" Simplicity, Dr. Wilson, is the one great gift which seems to have been withheld from you."

Then he went off the deep end. He gave me—as I have already chronicled—the details of his talk with Agatha, repeating her unwitting betrayal of what we knew.

" I offered to tell her my secret. And she winced because she had it already. I said that I wanted to keep that secret from Ursula. ' May it never mar her young life,' I said. And your sister nodded reassuringly : ' It never shall, Mr. Allen.' You were both fools, village idiots. Do you hear me ? " he shouted.

" I hear you, and so will your servants."

" I have always despised fools, and there is no fool like an old fool. Do you think I—I would have allowed my daughter to marry *you* ? In a few years you'll be wanting a nurse, not a wife. Are you such a flatulent fool as to think that she loves you ? She wants to escape from the boredom of this cursed village. And you—you were a means to that end. Well, she's a fool, too. Marry her and be damned to you."

He glared at me, and left me.

II

When Anstruther joined me I had recovered my self-possession, enough of it at any rate to hold my tongue about what had just taken place. Besides, my anxiety concerning Ursula was overpowering. He relieved that.

"She is better than I expected, but Willing will be attending to her before she is attending to you."

"You seem to be very sure that you have the right remedy?"

"Yes; I am. Why? Ah! If I gave you all my reasons I should have to embark upon my life history, cite cases, and so forth. You can take it from me that Wilson thinks he has triumphed."

"Well, hasn't he? He gets what he wants."

"What does he want?"

"I say—gold."

"You may be right. It would account for much. As for his assurances, his public assurances, that he wished to save thousands of lives, I don't believe it after meeting him. The man is a monster of selfishness. If he intends to save lives, it will be for the purpose of sacrificing them later on. Gold——! Yes; the gold for which he hounded his wife to her death, the gold you have given up to-day, is life blood to him. He has puzzled me. I didn't quite know how to deal with him. But, believe this, if he goes back to the Amazon swamps in his present physical condition he goes to certain death. He may be immune from this devilish fever, but is he immune from scores of other fevers which wipe out a weakling in a few hours? Wilson has the brains to stand just outside human law and justice; but Nature he cannot escape. Nature will wipe him out. At this moment he is as anxious as we are to undo his devilish work, because Miss Ursula's recovery means no interference with his plans. You saved the situation by sacrificing that money. It was no small sacrifice."

I said nothing; we walked on. Anstruther applied some more soothing ointment:

"He was illuminating in the laboratory. The man might have been a beacon light. He is colossal in his scientific attainments, encyclopædic. Here is the anti-toxin."

He showed me a small phial with no label on it.

"That?"

"Just that. Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Pollen, what that—and similar phials—stand for? Take this as a peg upon which we may hang a minute or two of talk——"

"Certainly."

"To get *that*, Wilson has endured incredible hardships; he would laugh at those, because they were physical; he has endured torments of mind, cumulative disappointments, the crazy wanderings in what I called a vicious circle of countless futile experiments. And he told me this—all he did tell me apart from the most explicit directions; at the end, after years of patient work, luck, just luck, put him on the right road. Banting, the diabetic fellow, had similar luck. Yes; Wilson found this anti-toxin when he was experimenting with serum at a slightly lower temperature than he took it to be. He's a beast, but a great beast."

"And so are you," I thought, because, listening to this young man, it seemed to me that an inordinate lust for scientific knowledge had assailed him. I could see, with a sort of mental vision, that both Ursula and Geoff as human beings counted less with him than Wilson. He had understood Wilson, because there was a leaven of Wilson in him. I may be wrong; I hope I am. To men like myself analysis of motives invariably ends in perplexity. I have now disciplined myself to think of Anstruther as the saviour of Ursula and Geoff. He does not so regard himself. Then and afterwards he made light of what he had done. Let me add that Anstruther is beyond my horizon. But I shall watch his career with deep interest, and also an affection for what I may term the less mechanical half of him.

He tackled his luncheon as I tackle mine after a good round of golf.

III

Before tea-time, on that never-to-be-forgotten day, I learned through old Deacon, who had it from Peabody, that "Mr. Allen" had gone to London. I was none too easy over this, but Anstruther heartened me up. Indeed he perpetrated a grim jest.

"Ramstock and he are having a scrap over the loot."

I didn't laugh.

" If we have been fooled——"

Time answered that question much quicker than a layman had deemed possible. I think, but I don't know, that Anstruther was surprised too, but he kept his thoughts in his three-storied head, and I wonder that there is room for them in such over-furnished apartments.

Both Geoff and Ursula responded to the new treatment. Geoff, in spite of the fact that the " onset " with him had been more virulent, was the first on his pins. I said to him, not Anstruther :

" What does this stuff do ? "

" Do——? Why, it kills the *spironemæ* stone dead in two jiffs. One day, if you can spare the time "—was he pulling my legs ?—" I will make a demonstration for you. You shall see through my microscope what happens."

Crowhurst is the right sort. I was not mistaken in my first impressions of him. And Crowhurst is to be trusted. When I said as much to Anstruther, he replied :

" Yes. Crowhurst, amiable as he is, is not likely to gibbet himself." Then he chuckled, and I asked him what amused him. " Well, Crowhurst is going to get the credit and the cash. Gilbertian, what ? "

If you come to think of it it was.

But Crowhurst was a great comfort to me, and I should certainly call him in if I caught measles or chicken-pox or even influenza. Our G.P.s are the N.C.O.s of the great army of doctors, and its back-bone. Anatole France remarked somewhere: " War is a serious thing—what a pity it is it has to be conducted by field-marshals." Of course he had met field-marshals, as I have. His ironical eye must have noted their age. Crowhurst is in the prime of life, but I hope he has saved enough to retire before he gets too old and dangerous. My shooting friends tell me that field-marshals, when low pheasants are about, have no regard whatever for the sanctity of human life.

I will pass rapidly to my first meeting with Ursula. She knew nothing then of what Geoff had done, about his infecting himself, I mean, and she was still miserably weak, but in good spirits. " Mr. Allen " had returned to Old Hall, and was at work, so Ursula told me, on a book not to be published till he sailed for South America. He kept out of my way, and you may be sure I kept out of his. Anstruther had left us. Geoff warned me that I should offend him past redemption if I tried to pay for his service with a cheque, and I was a bit short with the boy when I reminded him that such a warning was superfluous to a man of my large experience. Later on I did present him with a chronometer which it seems he coveted and with it a covering note, rather happily expressed to the effect that Time stood still with none of us, and that I hoped he would not ignore the rosy hours which fleet from youth too quickly.

IV

Ursula *seemed* just the same. We chattered away, gaily enough, about ourselves and the children. She hardly mentioned Geoff. I suppose that a man who possessed what Agatha calls a technique with women might have suspected something. Certainly I took Ursula as I found her. And I found her charming. It appeared perfectly natural to me that she was slightly chastened after much pain bravely endured. Perhaps I should have been shocked had I found her in the " out pounce, piggy " mood. And if something of her joy in life had gone I didn't miss it because other attributes had taken its place quite as captivating in their way. She talked more as a woman, although the child bobbed up now and again. There were swift transitions from grave to gay. I could not doubt that her outlook had widened. Yeldham, for instance, had assumed its right proportions. To my surprise she seemed to have abandoned the wish to live at Mote Farm. This again, after all her eagerness that I should buy the place, might have warned a man with a sound working technique that a bigger reason than mere change of mind was animating her. She asked me about my flat in London, rather a problem to myself. Agatha had solved it after her own downright fashion. She declared emphatically :

" Young married people must be left to themselves."

"Young——!" I ejaculated.

She laughed at me.

"Dear old Jim, you will be the youngest married man in the world."

This was too sweeping; so I protested. But she stuck to her statement, still laughing.

Ursula, I supposed, wanted to live in London in my own comfortable flat. Not a bit of it! She talked, very coaxingly, of Devon.

Devon——! Why—Devon?

"It's so remote, my darling. God bless my soul! If we lived in Devon we should never see Geoff or the children."

"Matilda and Jemima could come to us in the holidays. As for Geoff, he'll go on working without proper holidays till he drops."

"Nonsense."

"It isn't. He as good as told me so. He says that men like himself and that Mr. Anstruther can't have it both ways. Now, in Devon we could be ever so happy, Uncle Jim. Perhaps you—you couldn't live quite alone with me anywhere? Am I selfish to suggest that you could?"

I reassured her on that point.

"You kiss me, but you don't answer," she pouted. "But I have another nice little plan. You don't hunt or shoot. The winters are rather awful sometimes. And we've both been such stay-at-homes. We might, if it pleased you, travel, and —and spend this winter at any rate in Italy or the South of France."

But I was not coaxed. Personally, I rather like an English winter in England. And I had determined that Jemima and Matilda should have a jolly Christmas holiday. I anticipated great larks. And what is Christmas without vintage port? And isn't the proper enjoyment of vintage port dependent on latitude?

However, I had to go easy with a little invalid, and I did. Very soon the nurse came in, and bundled me out of the room rather aggressively, following me into the passage.

"You have excited my patient," said she.

"I found her pale, nurse, and I have left her with a pretty colour."

"I hope you understand, Mr. Pollen, that she must make haste slowly."

Another silly cliché!

I dealt with her faithfully. Always return a bromide for a bromide. It sharpens the wits and brightens dull conversation.

"I do understand that, nurse. We have had too much rain this afternoon, haven't we? *But* it lays the dust." She looked puzzled, so I added this: "After all, what we gain on the swings we lose on the roundabouts. *Au revoir.*"

V

I had to tell Agatha, when I got her alone, what Ursula had suggested about Italy. At once she assumed her maternal expression. And then, much to my annoyance, she asked:

"Why not? You can afford to travel. I remember telling you long ago that 'home-keeping youths had ever homely wits.'"

"Yes, you did, and I told you that 'a rolling stone gathers no moss.'"

"But now, my dear, you have the moss. Really, I think that little Ursula is wise. Take her abroad, travel; do Italy, and possibly Spain. She will be a delightful fellow-traveller, and she will have something to talk about when she begins her dinner-parties. And that reminds me—we might ask Dr. and Mrs. Crowhurst to dine. He is quite the man of the moment."

"The man of the moment—old Crowhurst?"

"He has worked a miracle with Ursula. I'm rather painfully alive to the fact that she mended rapidly apparently from the moment when poor Geoff stopped attending her."

As Anstruther said—Gilbertian. I wondered what the Berridges were saying about Crowhurst. I heard a sort of adulation swelling into a full-throated chorus. Obviously, praise is to be poor Crowhurst's penance. I could see the funny side of all this, and really enjoyed myself immensely. But I left Agatha slightly puzzled. She, too, had urged me to buy Mote Farm. Why had she changed her mind? I came to the considered conclusion that women change their minds to provoke argument in men. If anybody can advance a better reason I should like to have it.

VI

Geoff went back to Wimpole Street at the end of the week. I told him that I didn't consider he was fit to begin hard work again, but the boy was short with me. And what he said confirmed Ursula's estimate of him.

" I have my job, thank God ! "

I scribbled a line to Anstruther, begging him to keep his oil-immersion lens of an eye on my nephew. It was a comfort to think that he would for professional reasons alone. I re-read " Mr. Allen's " pamphlet that same evening. In it the author claimed confidently that his anti-toxin, if administered promptly, wiped out all the eels and effected a permanent cure. Apparently Ursula's complete recovery would take longer.

And now, with the greatest reluctance, I must write about my wretched self. What happened to St. Paul did not happen to me. No sudden light shone about me. On the contrary. I must describe myself as in the light, almost dazzled by the sunshine, and then, imperceptibly, darkness came on.

The first intimation that serious trouble was round the corner came from my fat Jemima. But here again I must break off abruptly to set down something I got from Crowhurst. It was a comfort to Crowhurst to talk with me, because he was pledged not to talk to anybody else about that accursed relapsing fever. Crowhurst threw a last side-light upon Wilson's appalling cleverness. I had asked him why Wilson had taken such an unconscionable time in curing himself. Crowhurst replied humbly :

" I asked Anstruther that question. Nobody dies of relapsing fever in the coroner's sense. They die of the complications that succeed each other. Had things gone along as Wilson expected they would, I should have made out a certificate stating that death was due to collapse brought about by weakness induced by enteric trouble. Wilson couldn't cure himself when he acquired the disease, because he had not then discovered the anti-toxin. He treated himself, probably, as Geoff treated Ursula. The property of salversan, for instance, is arsenic rendered atoxic, non-poisonous. But you don't want to muddle yourself over that. In these obscure tropical malarial diseases the tide of life goes out slowly. It flows back just as slowly. In Wilson's case, it took him months to recover, months, possibly, after he had exterminated the *spironemæ* in his blood. Ursula was ill nearly three weeks. It will take her three weeks at least before I can pass her as sound."

Bear this in mind, please, as I go back to Jemima. The child realised before I did that Ursula's recovery was retarded. She didn't " pick up " quickly, as we had hoped. I rejoiced when she was moved from Old Hall to the Vicarage, where Mummy Berridge and the nurse gave her divided attention. Ursula told me that her "father" had suggested the move. I could only suppose that Dr. Wilson was no more anxious to meet me than I was to meet him. The autocratic nurse "rationed" me in regard to my comings and goings, but Jemima and Matilda trotted down to the Vicarage as often as they pleased.

During these "rationed" visits—the sweeter because they were so—Ursula and I talked much of our future; and my past (and hers) seemed barren and negligible. It was agreed that we should be much together, and she had a happy faith that she wanted to be with me as much as possible, to share my thoughts, to be behind what work I might find to do, to help me to do it, just as I pledged myself to help her in the running of our home, and in all the little things that are such drudgery to women if they are left alone to do them. I told her that I had many friends who would be her friends, and she looked forward with delight to entertaining them in a modest way and being entertained by them. Again and again she would whisper: "Shall I make you really happy? Shall I?" and as often I assured her that she would. The cold wind of doubt as to whether a man of my fixed habits could make a young girl happy only whistled about my ears when I was away from her. Then I did ask myself if I could honour her drafts upon my devotion, and believed fondly that it would be an inestimable privilege to do so. She was the first woman in my life to present such drafts.

That other——!

Ah! How different had been her light, almost flippant attitude towards me! With what abasement I recalled her kisses and her protestations of love. And yet, I had kept her curl!

I am very sensible to music—not the very best (so Agatha tells me), and certain melodies (*Il mio Tesoro*, for instance, played delightfully by my mother) seem to sweep me on to some higher plane, where I feel at peace with myself and all the world. Ursula's soft voice had this magical effect upon me.

Well, Jemima and Matilda were in and out of her room about three times a day.

"The young ladies do her good," said Nurse.

Did she mean to infer that my less frequent visits did harm? I don't know.

Anyway, I was alone with Jemima when I first perceived a tiny cloud in the blue. And she had been alone with Ursula, because Agatha had taken Matilda to our London dentist. Jemima had said proudly:

"Don't worry, mummy, I shall look after Uncle Jim."

We planned a lazy afternoon in the punt. As soon as we had settled ourselves in cushioned ease Jemima said abruptly:

"Aren't you worrying a bit about Ursie? I am. And so is Matilda."

I wasn't alarmed. To me Ursula's recovery was such a miracle of God's grace that little ups and downs of convalescence were accepted cheerfully. Jemima went on:

"I and Matilda thinks she's not so jolly as she used to be. We tossed up who should speak to you, and I won, thank goodness!"

"You look upon telling me something unpleasant as a privilege."

"A 'priv'? Yes, it is. Because even Matilda herself knows that I can say things to you, Uncle Jim, which she can't."

I was beginning to be impressed. Jemima has a way with her which Matilda stigmatises as "canoodling." Really, there is a touch of Willing in Matilda. I hate to admit it, but there is. Jemima is out and out Pollen. Matilda may grow up to be a clever woman. Agatha is sure of it, and is furious with me when I mutter: "God forbid!"

I said pleasantly:

"If you are looking forward to biffing me on the head, why, do it, and let's get it over."

She snuggled up to me.

"How perfectly beastly of you to say that, when I loathe hurting you."

"Tch! Tch! a little lump of suet like you couldn't hurt any well-nourished uncle."

She said nothing, and really the silence became intolerable.

"Why don't you go on?" I asked.

" But I've told you. Ursie isn't jolly. And she looks unhappy if you catch her unawares. And, of course, it must be your fault ; *it must be.* Ursula has *only* you. She is fond of us, and she's rather afraid of Mummy, same as you are, and Geoff is nothing at all to her, absolutely nothing."

" How do you know that ? "

She wrinkled up her eyes and forehead in comical perplexity. Then she attempted a wild shot :

" Well, I'm Geoff's sister, but I expect I should be angry with him if he'd mucked me about——"

" Stop it ! I won't listen to such ugly words."

" They ain't, *aren't* mine. I'm only telling you what Mrs. Peabody says, *and* Peabody *and* Emma " —Emma was the kitchen-maid, aged fifteen—" and lots of others ; Geoff nearly *did her in*——"

I gasped. It never occurred to me that Geoff had made himself the target for such outrageous village gossip. Now I understood the beatification of Crowhurst. I was not sorry, although secretly amused, that he had been exalted, but at the expense of Geoff—no. However, I had to dissemble, uneasily aware that lying has its great uses and abuses.

" Look here, Jimmie, you're a good little soul, and you mean well, but—are you listening to me ? You are. Put this into your fat head, *and keep it there.* Don't repeat what I say, even to Matilda. I'm talking to you as my old pal "—she squeezed me —" and your old pal tells you that Ursie owes a debt of gratitude to Geoff that she can never repay, even if she lives to be ninety. More, Ursie knows what Geoff really is, one of the finest young fellows that ever stepped. I've had that from her own lips. Now—we'll begin, you and I, all over again. If you tell me that Ursie isn't jolly, I believe you, simply because you are you. She may be worrying because she can't run about with all of us; she may be worrying because I see so little of her; but whatever the cause of the worry may be, it's not Geoff, and it's not me."

"Then what is it?"

I couldn't answer the question, and switched her on to a less perplexing subject—setting night lines in the moat.

VII

But the seed dropped by that dear little hand grew into a upas tree. For many years, ever since I joined the Buskin, I have adopted a test, which I commend to all cock-a-whoop persons. At the Buskin the less distinguished members sit in the lounge and listen to the roaring of the lions. Invariably one outroars the others. As an undistinguished listener, I have been tickled by these blasts and counterblasts. A K.C., who intimidates famous jurists, knocks down an ex-Lord Chancellor, who in his turn crumples up the Master of the Rolls. Very instructive and edifying! But I say to myself: "If these pillars of the State tumble about like this, dare I stand up at all?" By a logical process of reasoning, I sit tight. Hence it comes that what I say on Monday undergoes modification on Tuesday. I apply my test to every positive affirmation I make. Am I not more likely to be wrong than right ?

This test was applied after Jemima left me. I had asserted that neither Geoff nor I could have anything to do with Ursula's unhappiness. I'm glad now that I was not such an ass as to contradict Jemima and assert that Ursula *must* be jolly. No ; I knew in my bones that Jemima could spot unhappiness in anybody. I accepted Ursula's unhappiness as a fact.

Who or what caused it ?

For a time I wandered in that vicious circle which Anstruther described so realistically. I decided that all searchers after precise knowledge are in the same boat, as Agatha would say. And a boat in a troubled sea, leaky, unfurnished with gear or rudder, is an apt simile.

After spending a miserable night in just such a cockle-shell, knowledge came to me with the dawn. Our triumph over Wilson had filled me with gratitude and happiness ; there was no room for jealous imaginings ; and Ursula had been so sweet to me, so tender. And yet, recognising as I did that suffering had made a woman of her, I had detected in her no signs of passion. Face to face with myself, with my own sacred feelings towards her, I had, whether I shrank from them or not, to take frank recognition of my physical impulses. Measuring them, I had to measure hers.

And her weight was short.

She didn't love me as a woman should love her mate. And she had found that out.

Did she love Geoff?

Mr. Allen *Chapter XVI*

I

I DARE to say in all humility that jealousy passed out of me. I was obsessed with the desire to find out the truth. And perhaps such obsession becomes intercession, a long drawn out prayer for help. I wanted to find the right way to Ursula's heart. In this, as in all deep matters, I had to work out my own salvation in seeking hers. What was best in her would work against me. Again and again I was tempted to compromise, to take what was offered me, what lay unresisting in my arms, *and be damned eternally*. I have written it. And I have stared at the words, as if some other pen had inscribed them.

In my loneliness I turned to Agatha, and turned away again. It is almost impossible to conceive of Agatha as the devil's advocate. She had fought all her life on the side of the angels, and occasionally the angels must have smiled upon so stout a champion. Nevertheless Agatha has original sin in her. And original sin I take to be obstinacy, that rejection of Truth, when the goddess emerges from her well and startles us with her nudity. The nude has always been shocking to Agatha. Her remarks upon one-piece bathing suits are hardly fit to be repeated. And so I turned from my sister, because I knew that she *might* be obstinate. And she didn't know what Geoff had risked to save the life of the woman he loved. I had no longer any doubt about his love for her. A thousand corroborative details came back to me. His refusal to talk of Ursula to me, his avoidance of my company; his too hasty return to work. He loved her with all the strength of his steadfast, uncompromising character.

And Ursula didn't know what he had done for her. She might—but I could hardly believe it—share the local opinion that Crowhurst had cured her. And when she did know, when, after marriage to me, the whole story was unrolled before her, with what reproachful eyes would she look at me. How could I answer the natural exclamation, " You ought to have told me " ?

I thought of these things and did nothing.

II

Perhaps conviction hovered above me when I recalled what had slipped out of my mind. Ursula's wish to spend the winter abroad. I had seen her often since then, and she had not urged the matter because I had turned down the project rather cavalierly. My memory does serve me by fits and starts. By fits, sudden jerkings, not only scenes but words flood my brain. That is why I have been able to set down, almost verbatim, many duologues in this chronicle. Her very words came back, and the pleading expression upon her face. She wanted—could I doubt it?—to put time and space between herself and Geoff. It might be a subconscious want, all the more insistent on that account.

I'm afraid that I might have gone on and on, "kidding myself" (to quote Matilda's favourite expression) that I was a perfect gentleman instead of a cowardly cad, if it hadn't been for a letter from Lansbury, marked "private," which knocked me end over end.

Lansbury began by putting my mind at ease in regard to Geoff's physical health. But imagine, if you can, my consternation and bewilderment when the man into whose comfortable slippers Geoff must inevitably step informed me that his junior wanted to cut loose from him and accept some offer from New York, a city too full of specialists already. Lansbury hinted that there must be a woman in the case, and added that he had insisted upon Geoff seeing me and talking things over. He ended up: "Woman or no woman, he will cut his throat if he leaves me."

By the same post arrived a curt note from Geoff, saying that he proposed to pass Sunday with us, arriving late on Saturday evening. Perhaps I ought to add here that I first met Lansbury at the Buskin. He is too busy to use the club as I do, but we are on very pleasant terms. I do not exaggerate when I add that Lansbury's friendship for me really secured Geoff his billet. I had to pay for it, of course, but Lansbury—good fellow though he is—rather rubbed it in at the time that he was taking on a very young man partly because he happened to be my nephew. Afterwards Geoff made good and more than good. I had Lansbury's own word for that. His letter confounded me.

And it forced me to take action.

Upon the afternoon before he arrived Mrs. Berridge had a word or two with me. Ursula seems to have inspired in her devotion. Not surprising if you bear in mind that Ursula's illness really evoked something approximating to universal distress in the village. Berridge and Mummy Berridge were on edge with anxiety as might be expected, but all the others, who had known her from a child, were poignantly affected—a great tribute. I marked the villagers staring at the big empty pew, and one old woman had tears trickling down her cheeks. I could have embraced her in front of the congregation.

I had spent an hour with Ursula as usual, my war ration, and her ways with me might well have deceived a cleverer man. Whatever good resolutions I might make when I was alone were dispatched to Pollen Square, in Hades, c/o Lucifer, as soon as I felt the touch of her hand. She loved me, but I could detect no difference between her love and Jemima's. I dare not say that she schooled herself to give me more kisses than I asked for, because then I should be accusing the child of acting a part. No; her caresses were spontaneous. It may be—the doubt played havoc with me—that she was *experimenting*, trying desperately, poor darling, to provoke in herself the physical impulses that were lacking. Again I don't know. Was it likely, I asked myself, that I, a man, could understand this maid when perhaps she couldn't understand herself? Upon this Saturday afternoon she was more captivating than ever. But I realised with a pang how frail she was. The emaciation caused by the enteric trouble was yielding to treatment, but the date of our wedding had been postponed. Geoff's letter lay in my pocket. I had to tell her that he was coming to us, although I knew that he would keep away from her. When I mentioned his name she flinched. I had mentioned it often before, and she had not flinched. She flinched this time—who could doubt it?—because he was coming to Mote Farm. One of her funny little "Oh's" fluttered from her pale lips. Then she compressed them, and said gently: "How pleased you must be."

Pleased——!

Why do the simplest words lacerate us?

I fell back on my nod, so useful to me, and talked of the children and their pleasure at Geoff's coming. She smiled pathetically at me—*and I knew.*

Mummy Berridge buttonholed me in the hall.

She began a frontal attack and went over the top with an alacrity that dismayed me.

"Why isn't Ursula stronger?"

"You had better ask Dr. Crowhurst!"

"I have. Now I ask you, Mr. Pollen. Dr. Crowhurst can do no more than he has done. Almost he has discontinued his visits. You can't answer my question, nor can he, but I can."

"Pray do, Mrs. Berridge."

She paused, eyeing me oddly, with half-averted eyes. Was the woman shy?

"I can, and I must," she repeated hesitatingly. "Ursula is suffering from apathy, Mr. Pollen, like—like the Conservative Party."

Amazing! One touch of humour makes the whole world kin. I felt more kindly disposed towards her, but her manner went on puzzling me. Why did she look at me as if she were afraid of me?

"You can talk plainly to me," said I.

"It's so difficult," she sighed. "And—and I'm so fond of Ursula."

"Well, I can understand that."

"Yes. Why is she apathetic, when she has everything that most girls have not to make her jump back into health and happiness?"

She was positively crimson with confusion.

" She is not apathetic with me, Mrs. Berridge."

" No, I dare say not. There's nothing the matter with her now except this—this apathy. It seems to me that she's making no effort, no sustained effort to get well."

" Mrs. Dombey, eh ? "

" I beg your pardon—— ? "

" Forgive me. You have upset me. When I'm upset, I say whatever pops into my mind."

This is true. Whenever I find myself confronted by some moral exigency my thoughts seem to wheel about like starlings before their flight south. It is comforting to reflect that our ex-Lord Chancellor, the same man who was downed by our famous K.C., admitted to me that his thoughts took similar junketings even when he wanted to marshal them upon matters of national importance.

" You are a nice kind man, Mr. Pollen."

" Thank you, Mrs. Berridge."

Then she spluttered out vehemently :

" But you *are* a man, and men, somehow, often can't see what they don't want to see. Oh ! what have I said ? I—I mean that they don't seem to see so clearly as women see."

I took her hand.

" It's all right, Mrs. Berridge. It was brave of you to speak to me like this. I promise you this : I am shortsighted, but I'll put on my clearers."

She emitted a sort of snort and left me.

III

I sent the car for Geoff, entrusting it to Agatha, a proof of my confidence in her which she heartily appreciated, because she really believes, poor soul, that she can drive better, or I should say more carefully than I can. On arrival, the children were all over the boy, and I couldn't—without being selfish—tear him away from them. Also, I had decided that dinner would fortify me. To be honest, I was in a procrastinating mood.

We were not alone together till Agatha had gone to bed. She *retires* (as she puts it) at ten-thirty to the tick, being punctuality itself in all such matters —not a Pollen attribute, she acquired it from Willing.

We were in the thick of it in less than a minute. The New York offer was genuine enough, and a satisfactory proof to me that Geoff is being recognised as a rising man. But to accept such an offer, however flattering in itself, meant abandoning solid substance for shadow, and I said so unhesitatingly. Geoff of course was cornered. He began to pace the room, a trick of his when he is agitated, and the truth burst out of him.

" I—I must go. Uncle Jim. I've not got over caring for Ursula. But I shall. I swear that. I can't trust myself to meet her. And how can I avoid meeting her when you come to London this winter ? I'm not a coward to make a bolt of it ; I should be a coward if I stayed. I—I can't jaw about it either, not to you, or to anybody. If there is any drive in me, I mean the right drive. I'm simply obeying a natural instinct. Do you think me a weak, wicked fool when I own up that I'm mad with longing for her. And is there, I ask you, something that might account for this physiologically? Her blood is in me. You laugh at that?

" It sounds so wild. And yet, one drop of ditch-water under a microscope reveals a new world. I attended her; I had myself in hand; I never relaxed my grip of myself, not once. But afterwards, when I was infected——! My God! If her disease passed so swiftly and easily to me, who dares to say what else passed with it? I say there is something of her in me. Something that draws me to her, something that is irresistible. And she is not for me. She is yours, all yours, except for that one drop of blood which is mine, and which is driving me out of England. I must go. As for the business end of it—that can be adjusted. This offer, a generous offer, carries with it no premium. Lansbury can lay his fingers on some fellow with more experience than I have who will buy me out. And I can hand over to you what I owe you, and with it a gratitude for all you have done that I can't put into words."

" Geoff——! "

" You blessed old Uncle Jim, you have never felt what I feel. Love came to you so gently that you were hardly aware of it. It was not so with her. She wanted you from the first. Instinctively she stretched out her arms to you. That was the drive in her. I recognised it instantly. Don't be vexed with me if I tell you she spread her net for you. Nature again. She picked you to be the father of her children. I speak plainly because nothing else is possible. You were her man. *I wasn't.* If I hadn't known that, would I have accepted her 'no'? *Never.* And so, for my sake, for all our sakes, make this going of mine easy. Because, whether you do or not, go I shall."

I said in a low voice:

"If Ursula had died——"

"Ah! You thought I was so brave, so dashing. Why, I hardly dared look you in the face when I told you what I'd done. I wanted to die, if she died. That was the dominating impulse. I expected her to die. I had no faith that you would make that madman accept your terms. And to me, the world without Ursula was bleak and cold as a sunless star."

I said nothing. I was shaken out of myself, seeing, perhaps glaring at a great lover, so big that I was shrinking into a dwarf beside him. Because I had thought, how often, that Ursula *was* going, drifting out of my easy life just as she had drifted into it. And I had reckoned up what was left to me, if she went—the children, Agatha, the boy, my good friends, and even the more material comforts which I had inherited and not earned.

Contrasting myself with this young man, what was my love compared to his?

Perhaps this was the bitterest moment of my life.

I forget what I did say to Geoff. Something fatuous to the effect that I must have time, something which may have made him think that, however sorry I was for him, I still stood secure in Ursula's love.

He went to his room and I went to mine.

IV

Next morning was Sunday, and I'm peculiarly sensible to the influence of our English day of rest. One of the many signs of the times that worry me is that Sunday is ceasing to be a day of rest.

I slipped down to the Vicarage after breakfast without saying a word to Geoff. I knew, too, that he couldn't escape from the children, and Agatha would insist upon his accompanying them to church. At breakfast he exchanged japes with Jemima and Matilda, confirming my belief that far back, perhaps in the eighteenth century, some famous actress must have married a Pollen. As our pedigree begins with my great grandfather I have no means of verifying this reasonable assumption.

I had to coax the nurse to let me see Ursula in the morning instead of the afternoon. Ursula, fortunately, was out of bed, and lying upon her sofa in the adjoining dressing-room, which had been turned into a sitting-room.

I kissed her as usual, sat down, and took her hand.

"I want to talk to you about Geoff."

"Yes; how is he?"

"He is thinking of going to New York."

"New York. Why?"

The colour flowed into her cheeks; her eyes sparkled with interrogation; she didn't look the least apathetic. Still, she dissembled.

"If he wants to go, he will go."

"Why do you say that so positively?"

"Because Geoff gets what he wants. Are you going to try to prevent his going, Uncle Jim?"

"I have not made up my mind about that."

"But—ought you to influence him, one way or the other? Naturally it doesn't affect me as it does his mother and you, all the same——"

"You don't like the idea of his going so far?"

"If it is going to advance him in his career. His career is everything to him, isn't it?"

"Not everything. It hurts me a little, my darling, that whenever you speak of Geoff your soft little voice hardens. Because of that I must tell you something. I thought it would keep, till you were quite yourself again but it won't."

Her eyes became troubled. I continued placidly:

"I can only tell you part of a story, the part that concerns you. Later on, after you are married, you will be told all of it."

"When we are married *you* will tell me?"

"Your husband will be the proper person to tell you. Put curiosity from you a little longer."

She said hesitatingly: "If it is an ugly story I don't want to hear it."

"You must hear part of it. You don't know; we have never told you that Geoff saved your life."

She gasped but I was greatly relieved to notice that there were no signs of weakness.

"Geoff saved my life," she repeated. "How?"

"You were suffering from an obscure kind of intermittent fever that puzzled both Crowhurst and Geoff. Geoff infected himself with your disease. Don't speak. That was why he ceased attending you. A friend of Geoff's, Mr. Anstruther, whom you saw, came down to study the case. He is a great specialist on that particular fever. If I tried to tell you what he did, you wouldn't understand me, because I don't understand myself. But he was able to cure Geoff and cure you, although Dr. Crowhurst got the credit for curing you. But I say to you, very solemnly, that if Geoff had not infected himself with your fever, it is humanly certain that you would never have recovered. And so, I repeat, you owe your life to him."

I spoke very gently and slowly.

"Geoff——!" she whispered. "It—was—Geoff?"

I couldn't bear to look at her, for, as she sighed out his name her face was transfigured. It seemed to me that some unearthly grace and benediction had fallen upon her, something so satisfying to body and spirit that she lay as one entranced. I could not doubt that I had ceased to be. She had flown to meet her lover; she was in his arms.

V

I got up and walked to the window, turning my back on her. I was so moved that I could not move. The spell lay upon me as it lay upon her. I stood still infinitely remote from her, remote, too, from myself, from the fleshly me. That was the wonder of it. I suppose I felt exactly what Geoff had felt. He was her *man*.

When I spoke I kept my back to her.

"Ursula——"

"Yes, Uncle Jim——?"

"Geoff is going away from all of us, going, perhaps, out of all our lives, because he loves you; he wanted to die if you died. And I, child, have never felt like that. It is given to few men to love as Geoff loves you. And he is right to go if you have no love for him."

No word came from her, and I groped blindly for my words, the simple words so hard to find when we hang helplessly between the heaven we strive to attain and the hell that drags us down.

"Your love for me, Ursula, has been the love of a child. You gave it to me knowing nothing of that other love which must come to every woman. It has come to you, although you have pushed it away from you. Even now, you may be shutting your eyes, dazed and dazzled by it. But I tell you this, if you love Geoff and try to give me what is his, and his alone, it would be far better for you if you had died, and better for me."

I remained with my back to her till I heard her sobbing. And when I saw her poor little face convulsed by the emotions which were tearing her, my own love for her was purged of all taint of desire. I knelt beside her and took her into my arms and crooned over her like any old woman. And whilst I mumbled this and that, she gripped my hand, as Jemima grips it, and from that moment she became another Jemima to me. In the end, I knew that the child in her would vanquish the woman, that she would whisper to me, as Jemima whispers, all that was in her heart.

And she did.

I cannot set down what she said. It would be profanation. But I had been right. During her illness when Geoff was priding himself upon hiding himself from her, she had applied her never-failing processes, extracting the grains of gold, and hoarding them, till the weight of them began to be too much for her.

To the end of her pitiful story she clung to me as if loath to let me go. She laid her cheek against mine and whispered :

" I should have made you happy, Uncle Jim. I meant to do that. I wanted to do that."

" You will make me happy yet," said I.

Perhaps the Pollens have descended from some minor prophet.

VI

She refused to see Geoff ; and the refusal was instinct with a delicacy and an old-fashioned charm that must have come from the lovely lady of the miniature. I left her, charged with a message to him. She wanted to meet him in London, not in Yeldham. I assured her that it should be as she wished. I knew, of course, that Geoff would write to her, and that she would write to him.

Geoff got her message that afternoon. I was unable to face the family at tea and had a tray sent to my room. A tray and a quiet pipe mean a lot to an old bachelor.

Agatha was told next day. She was terribly upset, and she managed, as she often does, to upset me. I fear that, after the fashion of good, earnest practical women, she had been prematurely delivered of my family, and had made many happy plans concerning my eldest son, who might attain to high civic dignities. But she consoled herself with the reflection that she would now look after me to the end, and she admitted that she had not been too sure in her mind of Ursula being able to assume such a grave responsibility. To soothe her, I told her that probably she was right.

A dismal reaction set in when the first self-righteous glow died down. Agatha is always telling the children in my presence (with a side-shot at me) that our happiness depends upon the happiness we give to others. And she has the unengaging common sense of the sages to back her up. But I'm not a sage. Really, I suppose, if a man concentrates upon the happiness of others, we may assume that youth, always self-centred, has gone from him. Indeed, when a man says to himself: "I must now interest myself more in the lives of others," it is a confession that he cannot interest himself whole-heartedly in his own. Anyway I found myself up against a bad time, and was very short with dear old Deacon, who behaved like a lamb, and complained querulously about the good food cooked by Mrs. Deacon, merely because I could bring no appetite to it.

Jemima boxed my compass for me.

She came to my bedroom late, as she had done before, but this time I was sitting in a chair, fully clothed though not in my right mind. I told her to go away but Agatha says that disobedience is the child's besetting sin. She sidled up to me, fetched a footstool, and sat down.

"I told you to go away."

"Yes; you did; but nice people never mean what they say. Uncle Jim, are you sickening for 'flu? I'm not afraid if you are, but I want to know."

Had she an inkling? From her fat little mask of a face I could glean nothing.

"I am perfectly well, child."

"You don't look it. Last time we had a heart-to-heart I told you that Ursie was unhappy. To-day she looks top-hole. You haven't lost your money, have you, Uncle Jim?"

"No."

"Are you getting fed up with us?"

"What an idea!"

"It's my own idea. Mummy said we were not to bother you. Why? She must think that we *do* bother you. Matilda thinks that perhaps we're getting too old for you."

I suppose my grim face relaxed into a smile, but Jemima didn't see it. She explained clearly:

"You said two years ago that you wished we could stop growing. I spoke to Deacon about it, and he said that gin did it, an awful whopper, because if gin does it why isn't Mrs. Deacon half the size she is? She slips a drop of gin into her tea, as of course you know and pretend you don't."

These children——! Can any self-respecting man deal with them, if once he admits them to full confidence. They take advantage of you every time. Still, I could see that Jemima, for all her pertness, was on the edge of tears.

"I and Matilda always have said that you're a Peter Pan, Uncle Jim. You don't know it, but you are. That's why you're asked to children's parties when all the other grown-ups are not wanted. If you're worrying because we are too old for you, why say so, and we'll know where we are."

She laid a fat hand on my knee and looked up anxiously into my face; then she added with a whimper:

"We shall hate the other children you play with; and it wouldn't be cricket not to tell you that."

I nearly surrendered then, but I smelt something.

"Jemima," I exclaimed severely, "you have been bagging your mother's scent! You reek of some filthy scent."

"Mummy doesn't use filthy scent. It's Emma's."

I groaned.

"Emma's——! What is this world coming to when baggages of fifteen buy scent?"

"Emma didn't buy it. Her young man gave it to her."

I was horrified.

"*Her young man?* That plate-smashing, flat-chested, smudgy-faced hop-o'-my-thumb has a young man?"

"Oh, Uncle Jim, you said that just like your old self. I—I believe you've been shamming, playing 'bear' all by your lonely."

She went into fits of laughter.

She was too much for me. I was so terrified that she was going to cry, and, somehow—the Lord knows how she did it—I had an ugly glimpse of myself, by myself, intent only on keeping myself in the durance vile of my own miserable thoughts. The children were going back to school in a few days. Their summer holidays had been wrecked. I had an awful vision of our meeting again at Christmas as grown-ups with " Yes, Uncle Jim—No, Uncle Jim—please, Uncle Jim "—that cackling chorus of inanities which between children and their elders seem to take all melody out of family life.

" If you don't hook it, you evil-smelling whelp, I'll heave a pillow at your head."

She jumped on to my knees.

" Oh, Uncle Jim, how you have frightened us ! Fancy if we thought of you as the Bogey Man."

And thus sanity returned to me.

VII

Geoff and Ursula were married at Christmas, when Mr. " Allen " was ascending the Amazon. In his absence I gave the bride to my nephew, and gave her to him joyously. Long before, I had written to my landlord to announce the breaking off of my engagement to Ursula and her engagement to Geoff. He replied formally. I burnt the letter because it is not the sort that one likes to keep to show to one's enemies. He hinted that if Ursula had set her heart on marrying, it was a matter of indifference to him whether she took an old 'un or a young 'un.

After the wedding, when Geoff and Ursula were in Italy, I began to worry a little. It had been all very well for me to give up Ursula's dowry, but now that she was a comparatively poor man's wife couldn't I make an attempt to get something for her? The bright idea occurred to me of "holding up" the liquescent Ramstock. I felt pretty certain that he must have secured a considerable share of the plunder for himself, and if I tackled him in the right way I might induce him to open his purse as well as his pores.

I lunched at the Buskin, and after rest and further refreshment, went round to my own solicitors who did not hold the same opinion of Ramstock's respectability as he had expressed about theirs. The information I got was useful to me. Ramstock had negotiated the purchase of the Yeldham property some fifteen years before, though he had not admitted that to me. More important still, he had sold the Venner Hall estate a year previously. So he did unquestionably know that Allen was Wilson; and he must have known, also, about Mrs. Wilson's will.

I found my Ramstock as pinguid as before and still engaged in dealing with his superfluous moisture. "Well, what can I do for Mr. Pollen?" he asked, as I took the chair he indicated, close to his desk.

I had anticipated this solicitorial question, and was ready with my answer.

"You can write me a cheque for seven thousand pounds," said I.

His reply somewhat disconcerted me. The benignity of his smile could not be improved upon, as he murmured :

" With pleasure, Mr. Pollen ; if you will assure me that you will make proper use of it."

" The use I shall make of it," I said, " is to hand it over to Mrs. Geoffrey Willing. She was entitled to fifteen thousand pounds on her marriage under her mother's will. The greater part of that has been done away with by one of the biggest scoundrels that ever walked ; and I think it is reasonable to expect to get back about half of it for her."

" It would be reasonable if it was there to get, Mr. Pollen," said Ramstock, still ingratiating. " But even admitting that my client is a scoundrel, an admission that no respectable solicitor would make——"

" A solicitor who isn't respectable might just as well make it and save time," I interrupted him.

That brought him to his bearings.

" If you have come here to make accusations against me, Mr. Pollen, I shall know how to deal with them," he said, not without dignity.

I didn't mind his pretence of dignity ; I had weapons to prick it.

" I've no doubt you will," I said. " You must have prepared your ground long ago. Still, there's a good deal you have to meet. I've looked up the Bellingham-Wapshott case, in which you asked for—well, I needn't remind you what you asked for and how you asked. Better keep it buried, Mr. Ramstock. You had a little trouble with the Income Tax people too, didn't you? False return, wasn't it? You know better than I."

"Is this blackmail, Mr. Pollen?" he asked, with a quite creditable air of indignation.

"Nothing like it," I said. "I've just been looking things up. I'm not nearly finished yet, but I know enough to be sure that some of the money that your client made away with stuck to your fingers. I put it roughly at about seven thousand pounds. It may be a little more or a little less. But we won't haggle. Both of us hate publicity, eh? But, if we can't settle quietly between ourselves, it will have to come; and it seems to me that I shall get rather the better of it, if we appear together in the Picture Press. You are aware that I sacrificed, on behalf of my future wife, all interest in the late Mrs. Wilson's will; but now Miss Venner is married to a rising young doctor seven thousand pounds will come in handy. You're a busy man, Mr. Ramstock, and I've plenty to do. Let's settle this little matter here and now, and get it off our minds."

I had got him, though he didn't give way all at once, and there was no sign of confusion on his large expanse of face.

"I should like a few minutes to think this over."

I made no objection to that; and we sat in silence for two and a half minutes by the clock. He broke it once only: "Seven thousand pounds is a large sum to find," he said.

True enough, but I had a conviction that he could find it, if he tried, and so made no answer. Ramstock went on thinking. At last he looked up at me biliously: "I will hand you a cheque for three thousand in a week's time," said he.

I rose from my chair: "Good afternoon, Mr. Ramstock," I said; and made for the door.

That downed him. Within ten more minutes I had left him with the whole matter arranged satisfactorily, at least to me. Ursula would get her seven thousand. I had done a good afternoon's work, with the added satisfaction of thinking that I had done it well, remarkably well. My satisfaction was increased by my winning four rubbers running at the Buskin, and adding three pounds, fifteen to my little fortune.

I forgave Ramstock.

It is extraordinary how success opens your heart to your fellow creatures, even the most unworthy. I almost liked Ramstock because I had defeated him.

None the less I don't want to see him again; and I hope, with all my heart, that I never shall.

VIII

"Mr. Allen" left England, speeded on his way by our Press. I wonder if he chuckled when he read what was written of him. I wonder whether good old Crowhurst chuckles when Mummy Berridge says to him: "We know how clever you are, don't we, Edgar?" And Berridge, thinking of higher matters, nods absently and murmurs: "Yes, indeed, yes."

But the mills of God grind us all out. In the spring a rumour reached us of "Mr. Allen's" death; it was confirmed about a month later; but the details I had from Laxton, when that intrepid explorer returned last month from Quito. Laxton, as everybody knows, began life as a mining engineer. And Laxton knew Allen. More, I seemed to detect in Laxton—just as I had detected in Anstruther—the Wilson tincture, call it a supernormal quality, the indomitable will to win through against overwhelming odds. Anstruther arranged that I should meet Laxton. He came to me at my flat, where I had settled down again very happily after all my bludgeonings. How I had missed my books at Mote Farm! There they stood, these dear friends, in serried rows; and above the dwarf bookcases hung my prints which I have collected for so many years. Just before Laxton was shown in by Deacon, I had taken stock, so to speak, of my surroundings, appraising what my "things" meant to me. I eyed approvingly my cosy chairs, the wood fire crackling on my hearth, my desk with its engaging litter, the general air of peace and security. Expecting Laxton, knowing from his famous book what he had endured during the past ten years, this renewed sense of security affected me profoundly. He had gained fame, and earned it. I felt that I had earned peace. I was at peace with myself—in safe harbourage.

Laxton's appearance rather shocked me. He was about middle height, with thin sandy hair, a bristling red moustache, and a pair of fine grey-blue eyes, which Agatha would describe as "steely." An equatorial sun had sucked vitality from every bit of him, except those remarkable eyes. He was much emaciated; and my concern must have showed itself, for he said quietly: "I'm putting on weight, Mr. Pollen; if you had seen me three months ago——!" I preen myself upon my imaginative powers; but they failed me utterly then. I couldn't conceive what Laxton had looked like three months before. It struck me at once that he was the last man in the world to indulge in exaggeration. He spoke simply, conveying the assurance that he was afraid of saying too much. But, while he talked, his eyes seemed to be peering into a distance so immeasurably remote from me and all my experience of life that I too felt myself remote, strangely detached from this room of mine, and following those eyes into hideous jungles and swamps. As soon as he left me, I hastened to jot down, as accurately as possible, what he had said. His first words left me agape:

"Allen was after gold—and he found it."

Mind you, Laxton was with me for two hours at least; so I must condense his narrative. Practically, he confirmed Allen's statement that there might be some savage tribe near the upper waters of the Amazon who had frying pans of solid gold. I had accepted this from Allen with the reflection that a former generation had read Waterton and refused to believe some of his affirmations which since then have been proved to be true. Still, even from Laxton, I dismissed the golden frying pans as flights of lunar fancy. Laxton may have read my thoughts because, immediately, he became the mining engineer. He touched lightly upon the famous find of gold in the Feather River of California. It will be remembered that a part of that river was diverted from its course at immense expense, and in the dry bed vast deposits of alluvial gold revealed themselves. According to Laxton, Allen had discovered a nomad tribe in possession of gold and knowing nothing of its value. He had ascended the Amazon to Iquitos, where he had chartered a large launch which carried him as far as he could go. Then, in canoes, he had made the famous passage of the Pongo de Masseriche, a boiling series of whirlpools. Above that at some point he had left his canoes and half of his men. With his native porters he had gone on and up, till he found the tribe he was seeking whom he heard of from the Aguaruna Indians. At this point Laxton paused, and, thrusting his hand into a pocket, pulled out an oblong lump of metal with a hole in it, which he handed to me.

"The men, not the women, were wearing ornaments like this. It is pure gold."

I held it in my hand as he went on. According to Laxton the difficulty of getting reliable inforation from savages is almost impossible. This particular tribe wandered about nearly naked, using the most primitive weapons, and relying for the most part upon their blowpipes. And here again, with a chill sense of what is dramatic, Laxton handed to me one of the tiny poison darts, a splinter about eight inches long, which can inflict instant death without poisoning the flesh of the victim.

" You can keep it if you like," he said. I returned it.

What he told me next he admitted to be partly guesswork and partly hearsay. Allen must have acquired definite information, because he set to work to repeat history by deflecting a small stream into another channel at a point far above the tree line. To do this successfully he had to get labour, and Laxton confessed that how he got it taxed his imagination. Ultimately Allen secured a quantity of gold and returned with it to his canoes. It seems that the fact of his getting the gold was established, in just what quantities Laxton refused to hazard a conjecture. Up to this point I had listened attentively to my informant, impressed by his quiet voice and manner. But, without putting his own suspicions into words, possibly out of respect for the dead man, he imposed on me an ever-increasing sense of horror. I gathered that Allen had stuck at nothing to secure this gold, and that he had made a bitter enemy of the chief of the tribe. Laxton had no doubt whatever that Allen and his party were followed by this chief when he was trekking back to his canoes through jungle where none can see more than a few feet ahead or behind him. Gooseflesh rose on me when Laxton said simply:

"You cut your way in perpetual twilight. The vegetation is so rank that it overgrows former paths in a week. You are following a blazed trail from which you dare not stray twenty yards. And all around you are the whispers of the forest. You may be within reach of one of those poison darts; if you suspect the presence of an enemy you dare not attempt to locate him, because you would be helplessly lost in five minutes. It—it is a great strain on the nerves, Mr. Pollen." I nodded. The strain on my nerves was tightening, as he evoked shadowy forms creeping from tree to tree, waiting for their opportunity, afraid only of the white man's rifle, regarding him, fortunately, as a malefic god and as such sacrosanct.

From the evidence gathered later on by Laxton, Allen had packed his gold in the canoes and was ready to start down stream on the morrow. Two survivors lived to tell this tale. That night he and his men were attacked and massacred. Laxton left no doubt in my mind of what happened to Allen at the hands of vindictive savages. Killing does not amuse them; torture does. I cannot bring myself to set down what Laxton hinted at;

and here again I must emphasise my conviction that Laxton hid from me certain incidents in Allen's past history that are dead as he is, and must remain so. With all savages the "eye for an eye" doctrine of retaliation is an obsession. Laxton never said so to me, but I knew, I repeat, I knew that in his opinion Allen reaped the reward of cruelty practised by him and his men to achieve their ends.

"He perished miserably, Mr. Pollen. I had that from the lips of another chief. His headless body was found, only to be identified by his clothing and his white skin."

"Headless—— ?"

"Yes; the savages who followed him were head-hunters. Allen's head may be identified years hence. Who knows? If you have ever seen one of these ghastly miniature heads you will know that the likeness is preserved. The chief who took Allen's head would regard it as his most precious possession. After cursing it heartily, he would remove the skull, and treat what was left by some secret process unknown to me. He would sew up the lips, so that no curses could issue from the mouth of the dead enemy; then he would knead it, day after day, till it took its final shape. And lastly he would blacken it and polish it, and hang it round his neck or at his girdle.

I thought of Allen's "heads," and what he had said to me about the unseen risks of the jungle.

"Who found the headless body?" I asked.

"The rescue party from the steamer."

"And the gold for which he ventured so much?"

"It was never found. Probably we shall never know. The canoes packed with it may have been sunk by the head-hunters. The gold returned to the bed of another river. And Allen's spirit—if we can believe such men as the late Sir William Crookes—must hover near it, earth-bound, because he, Mr. Pollen, sacrificed all things to his inordinate lust for gold."

"Yes," said I.

THE END

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Vachell, Horace Annesley
Mr. Allen

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